

Radio Static by Archer of Ecclesia

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Summary: "'Mike," El had scarcely noticed her seizure of the radio. Garble filled her ears. Her grip around the radio tightened as she quickly switched it off, breathing shallowly. She almost threw the device across the room when the garble continued, and worsened, more severe than ever." Mike x Eleven. A new creature lurks in Hawkins, Indiana, this time, closer to home than ever.

1. First Encounter

A/N: I haven't written in so long, it feels good to have a non-crossover piece out now. This started out as a completely fluff piece, but I decided to take it another way and have Mike and Eleven tormented by more than just their friends.

I don't own *Stranger Things*.

0-0-0

"Scary," Eleven whispered.

Mike felt his heart swell in his chest as he brimmed over with a sense of protection. El's eyes were wide, and while Mike knew that she was the bravest of them all, he still felt nothing short of obligation to guard her.

He felt a surge of strength compile within his arm before he violently batted the offending creature away.

"Dude, what the hell!" Dustin shouted, gracelessly flopping over as he attempted to save his copy of *Alien* from his crisscross position. He missed, the clunky VHS tumbling further from his reach.

This school year had been a grueling gauntlet for the majority of the group. It had finally drawn to a close the week prior, and celebration was mandatory. After heated debate, it was decided that a home movie was the most suiting festivity. A trip to the movies could overwhelm El, and the group would also have all of summer to explore the forest, which could still conjure foul memories for Will.

Everyone biked home after school with the energy expected of freed children to collect their favorite movies. Karen, who had not immediately liked the idea of a young girl spending the night with her budding teenager, finally consented after weeks of nagging and offered her basement for the party. Food was hoarded and the kids fell upon it like hungry werewolves before they settled downstairs, rifling through the assortment of films.

So far, there seemed to be no luck in finding something that satisfied everyone. Horror movies were almost out of the question, no matter how 'scientifically accurate' they were or were not. Most action movies would be shot down by Lucas, who hated inaccuracy in fighting.

Finally, *E.T.*, and *Monty Python* cleared the 'maybe' mark after much discussion.

Mike studied the tapes fervidly from his seat on the blanketed ground by Eleven. He plucked *E.T.* up and showed it to El, who traced the outline of the two figures on a bicycle outlined by the moon. "This one came out just last year. And they bike around like us, and E.T.'s good with radios and stuff, like you."

Lucas groaned. "Dude, stop trying to sway her vote, you know she'll listen to you."

Mike leaned forward and shoved *Monty Python* towards his stack of VHS cassettes, shrugging. "The tape is too fuzzy anyway."

Lucas rolled his eyes, but accepted that there was little he could do to change the collective obsession over Eleven and her well-being.

Very little was said during the film, minus Dustin's occasional outbursts of excitement.

It seemed like there would be little excitement for the duration of the movie. That remained true, at least for those who weren't El and Mike.

El wasn't fond of the quarantine scene. She had gone from slowly inching her way closer to him to nearly jumping into his lap when the faceless men in sterile lab coats appeared.

"Bad men," she stated. "They're bad men," she stated, trying her best to fix her broken English.

"Yes," he agreed, pretending the jolt he felt run up his spine was from pain and not something else. "Bad men. But they'll stay in the TV, I promise."

She nodded. "Scaredy cat," she whispered. She had picked the name up from a mouthbreather who had insulted Will's learned fear of the dark. While the flickering arcade lights had only alerted Will, the floating Pac-Man game which lurched toward Troy's friend, Carl, had caused him to wet himself.

"You're not a scaredy cat," Mike said sternly. "You've just... I dunno, had a bad past."

Mike reached around her hunched form, drawing her closer with his arm. At first, his hand rested on her soft hip, which he felt was too daring. His hand rose and brushed against what was dangerously close to her chest, then fell to the bony outcrop of her hip again. *This is so hard*, he thought to himself.

His arm slowly caught fire. It started in his clavicle, where her longer wisps of hair tickled at his skin. It spread to her head resting on his shoulder, his forearm where her back sat, and burned his fingers that rested against the cotton of her new pale dress.

The others watched the movie happily. El watched with fascination. Mike glanced over several times to see her eyes filled with wonder.

Even once the scary parts had passed, she remained cuddled close to his figure. The two had been growing closer than ever since El was found alone in the woods, filthy and near feral. Mike felt that if he blinked for too long, she would be trapped in some terrifying alternate dimension again.

Of course, he had also had to worry about his growing affection for the small girl. Mike worried that he was being too overt with his attraction to her. The two spent a lot of time alone, and every second of it felt fluttery and nervous.

They would brush hands, and El, probably not understanding what a romantic gesture it was, would gladly comply to place her fingers carefully between his. Their hugs would linger, Mike flushing when he stood pressed against her too long.

Before Mike was ready, the movie ended and El straightened her back in a stretch. She yawned, Mike watching her features adorably slump

into sleepiness. "I'm tired," she stated.

"Okay," Mike sighed, trying to hide the disappointment in his voice. "Well, Mom wants you to sleep in Nancy's room. Nancy's going to be home late, so she'll probably just sleep on the couch, so if you need anything, you should take this."

Mike handed over his radio.

El intently observed the device. She sometimes had trouble with reading human emotion, and Mike knew she loved machines because they were always straight-forward and honest.

He watched as her eyes traced over every detail on the dials and gauges before she met his eyes and smiled brightly.

"Goodnight," she said.

"Goodnight," Mike replied, watching as she turned and moved upstairs.

0-0-0

Eleven stared up at the ceiling. She wound her hands into a tight ball, then unraveled it slowly. The ball formed, collapsed, formed again and collapsed again many, many times.

There was little that was scarier than being left alone on nights like these. In Indiana, the weather was bipolar and subject to change any minute – at one, El would hear wind fiercely tearing at the trees that groaned in protest, and in the next, it would be completely calm. Clouds glided with the willpower of the wind, blotting the moon's light out periodically.

Off in the distance, there was a thunderstorm whipping about.

Lightning brilliantly illuminated the sky for a split-second. El sat up, tense with the electricity that still hunched in the air. She looked out the curtains that were immobile to the untrained eye, but swayed uneasily to El.

Past the curtains, the night was alive.

White light filled the sky again, announcing the nearing storm with a distant rumble of something massive.

"Mike," El had scarcely noticed her seizure of the radio.

Garble filled her ears.

Her grip around the radio tightened as she quickly switched it off, breathing shallowly. She almost threw the device across the room when the garble continued, and worsened, more severe than ever.

Thunder growled at her again.

She had rarely experienced any weather phenomenon of summer. The snowstorms of winter nearly froze her to death when she fled the Demogorgon, and spring and fall were mostly calm. But towards the end of spring, thunderstorms assaulted her very existence. The lightning was too bright and the thunder was too close.

The lab had deprived her of many experiences, one of which was learning how to deal with severe weather. When she was with Hopper, she always shied away from windows and occasionally ended up in the chief's bedroom when thunderstorms started.

This was the first time that she had been left alone for one.

Her hands shook as she moved the radio back up to her mouth, preparing to speak through the dryness. She switched it on and was greeted with the sound of a million people speaking in hushed voices.

El gave up on contacting Mike, dropping the radio as it chattered quietly. Thunder grew closer to the house. She shuffled to the edge of the bed as rain began to slam against the side of the house.

No longer had she stood up then did something let out a muffled scream and slam its paws against the carpet.

She whirled around, catching the creature with her mind and lifting it up, about to twirl it through the window when –

"El!" a hushed voice shouted.

Mike flopped back down to the carpet when El released him, her edge disappearing.

He coughed, quieting his noise with a fist. "What was that about?"

El sat down beside him on her knees, half-crawling onto his slumped form. "I don't like thunder." There was another moment of silence, when even the rain itself seemed to halt. "I'm sorry I grabbed you. You scared me."

Mike awkwardly squirmed around, moving so that his freed lower half could rest on its side like his torso. "The thunder can't hurt you. Normally, you do fine during thunderstorms. Was it because you were alone?"

"The radio," El replied, keeping her voice to a hush. She assumed that Mike didn't want his parents to be woken. She put a finger to her mouth in the 'quiet' motion that the boys had taught her.

"What about the radio?" Mike pressed. He moved his hand to El's elbow, causing her to feel a jolt race up her arm like he had violently struck her 'funny bone'. She didn't understand what was so funny about the bone, it hurt very badly when it was hit. "El, tell me."

It was hard to focus around the rain patter, the thunder's foreboding pause between each clap, and Mike's warm, firm hand. "Can't... I can't explain."

She clambered up from the center of Nancy's room to fumble in the darkness for the radio she had forsaken. "It's doing this," she supplied, turning up the volume. The chatter continued incessantly. "They're talking to me," she said cryptically.

Radios were nothing to Mike. El watched him as he brought the device up to his ear. El held his breath, unaware if he would be able to decipher the code the monsters were spewing. "It's just static," he replied after a moment. He smiled, pulling El closer to him.

El's face was burning bright with embarrassment. Her face was so hot that she was terrified of the idea that she was glowing like a coal. "Static never sounded like that."

"Well," Mike's face lit up, and instantly, El forgot that her glowing face was embarrassing as she moved closer to Mike, enthusiastic to hear Mike explain something. "You know that lightning is electricity, right?"

El nodded. "Mr. Clarke," was her simple explanation.

Mike smiled proudly. "Radios try to talk to each other during thunderstorms. Well, because there's so much electricity in the sky right now, they're getting confused and trying to talk to the sky."

"Not monsters," El breathed out in relief.

Deep down, she knew that she was safe. But she would never want to brave something alone if she knew that Mike was only a call away. El smiled contently, moving closer to Mike, her hair brushing against the beads of carpet. Her eyes adjusted quickly to the shift in vision, barely able to focus on his face.

"Are you sleepy?" Mike asked.

El nodded. "What time is it?" she whispered. "I think I woke you."

"It's after midnight. But it's okay. You should go back to sleep." Mike gently squeezed El's arm.

"Stay?"

"Hell no," Mike stated. El felt her heart do something weird and painful in her chest before she heard Mike's laugh. "I'm not staying in Nancy's room. Come down to the basement with me, just don't wake up my parents. Or the guys." With the way he emphasized his words, El judged that waking the guys would subject the two to a worse fate.

The two rose in unison, El seeking to grab Mike's hand the moment he had released her elbow.

El followed Mike silently, smiling lightly as he tried to be quiet, failing miserably as his gangly, growing limbs refused to listen to him.

The stairs creaked only once as they descended down the basement

stairs. El hesitated, staring out at the array of sleeping bags that had been messily strewn out and kicked around the room in fits of sleep. "I won't bother them?"

Mike shook his head. "I'm sure they'll understand."

She still stood at the sixth step from the bottom, barely seeing Mike's silhouette on the fifth step against the darkness, the only light coming from the T.V. that had been left on.

"I won't bother you?" she asked, feeling that she must be more tentative. "You and I are... different?"

Mike tensed, then sighed. "Yeah, but it's a good kind of different. I mean, Mom will kill me if she wakes up to see you in my sleeping bag, and it's kinda early for us to sleep together, in any way, but this is a special circumstance..." Mike trailed off, seeming to understand that his ramble was leaving El confused.

"Mike?" El asked again after fighting the thick stone that had formed in her throat.

"Yes, El?"

Instead of answering, El just moved her forehead against his, feeling herself teeter lightly as they both fought to balance on the stairs. She nervously placed her hands on his shoulders and gently bumped her nose against his, letting out a humorless laugh at the contact.

The moment she felt she was about to do something 'romantic', as everyone had called it, a beam of light flashed offensively off from the side.

"Guys!" Lucas whisper-shouted, waving the beam back and forth. "There's a serious problem!"

Will flicked on a lamp, Dustin's eyes still glued to the static on the T.V., unmoving.

In his hand, Lucas held Mike's radio, or what had been his radio. Now, it was a pile of melted plastic, with messy, burnt hairs of wire frayed out in many directions.

"My radio," Mike said, disappointment evident. He squeezed El's hands.

El looked over to his face, seeing that it crestfallen with disappointment. "Did I-?"

"It just," Lucas paused, searching for accurate (and 'Eleven-appropriate', as Mike called them) words to use.

"Exploded!" Dustin finished, his voice lacking any trace of humanity. The T.V. continued to spit out sounds of static. "And then this came on. And it's been making some really, really weird noises. Like I'm talking noises that a team of the best Elven and Dwarven scholars couldn't translate."

El was completely silent, feeling herself go lightheaded. Mike, still having hold of her hands, steadied her and gave her an odd look.

She looked up at the faces of the young dungeon explorers, and with her ever-growing vocabulary of Dungeons and Dragons, replied, "Demon scholars. You'd need demon scholars."

0-0-0

A/N: Fin. I expect this to be a multi-chapter story, the first of which I am attempting in a very, very long time. This will only happen if I feel like this is worth it, though. I love this piece, but I don't know if it's good enough for a continuation. Please, leave a comment, a fav, or even PM me with your responses and let me know if you want to see this worked on more or not.

UPDATE: Apparently fanfiction doesn't like my Word's borders so I spent THIRTY MINUTES trying to figure out how the hell to fix it and finally fixed it so now all the chapters will flow much more coherently, please re-read the story so I don't look like a grammarless slob c:

2. Nasty Surprise

A/N: Please review and favorite c:

Hell week begins next week, and after that I have finals. I will be very busy for the next three weeks or so, but I will strive to keep this updated regularly.

0-0-0

Static sputtered continuously from the television screen. It had been sizzling for nearly ten minutes straight, much to the amazement of Dustin. He sat slack-jawed, staring at the screen, like at any moment, the pepper-colored lines would peel away and an evil mage wizarding over electricity would seize him.

"It's not going to do anything," Lucas snidely commented, irritated by the constant onset of noise. "And staring at it won't change anything."

Dustin, if he heard Lucas, ignored him. "I think I see something moving in there."

"Or maybe you're just going blind." Lucas had moved to the couch, sitting with his feet up and his bushy hair gracing the floor. It seemed he thought that blood rushing to his head would create a more merciful headache than the one Dustin's behavior would.

Will remained silent throughout the chaos. He had been holding a flashlight that Mike had dug up from his parents' emergency storm stash. He cast the beam from face to face as if he had truly become Will the Wise, using a spell of illumination.

Mike and El sat closer to the stairs, just barely out of the glow the T.V. produced. They sat around an industrial camping lamp, staring at it rather than each other.

El sat nervously with her knees drawn up to her chest, chin perched over her crossed arms. She didn't understand how Mike couldn't stop fidgeting at a time like this. Every movement was a possible beacon to whatever adversary lurked within the electrical cords and radio

waves.

"Stop," she politely stated, reaching across and placing a hand on Mike's bouncing leg. "Don't be afraid."

He looked up for the first time since they had seated themselves. He puffed out his chest and nodded. "Right. Gotta be brave."

"Gotta be vigilant!" Dustin added. "You never know when something could happen."

Little did Dustin know, his vigilance had only lasted him about twelve minutes. El watched the watch on her arm intently. She glanced over to notice that Dustin was already showing signs of tiring.

His explosive excitement came in bursts. They would last for several minutes, or sometimes, several hours, but would crash and leave him silent or asleep. When the bursts were late at night, his head would grow too heavy for his neck to support and would begin to teeter. His baby teeth would show as his mouth opened slightly and he drooled.

El rose to her feet.

Much to the protest of Dustin, she reached down for the power button and hit it.

The T.V. died with a final, high-pitched noise.

"What the hell was that for!" Dustin yelled, no longer tired.

"My parents—" Mike began weakly.

"It's about time someone shut that thing up," Lucas sighed, readjusting his position. Instead of hanging like the curious creature called a bat, he flopped sideways and stared blankly elsewhere.

"Is it time to go back to sleep?" El asked.

"I would say that's a good idea." Mike hopped up and moved about the room, readjusting sleeping bags. "I think we'll need some sleep. I plan on going out tomorrow."

"Where?" Will, Lucas, and El asked at the same time. Dustin asked the same after a delay of several moments.

Mike shrugged. "Well, there's a lot of places to start checking around here. We can check for a new gateway to the Upside-Down, or we can check the radio station, or the electric company..."

El wandered over to the couch that Lucas vacated. She curled up against the back cushions.

The boys shuffled over to their collective sleeping bags. Mike slept closest to the stairs. He reached over and grabbed the lamp, holding it as he stared at Eleven. He raised a hand that visibly shook before beckoning for her.

El stood up and walked over, curling up beside him. Mike reddened before shutting off the lamp quickly.

The two shuffled awkwardly for a minute, El noticing that Mike was attempting to be silent. She did the same and the two eventually fit into the narrow space. El reached over to pull up the lip, shivering slightly. Despite the summer heat, the Wheelers' basement was always cold.

"Here," Mike said in a hush. He pulled up the zipper on the side, bringing the two closer together. "Are you sure you don't want me to sleep on the couch?"

El nodded. There was a moment of silence before she remembered that it was pitch black. "No. I want you to stay."

She reached down, searching for Mike's hand in the interior of his sleeping bag. She squeezed it, feeling reassurance. "You make me feel warm."

Mike made a noise that was comparable to choking.

She scooted herself closer to him, confused. "Did I say something awkward?"

Hard words sometimes hung her up. Awkward was a new one that the guys had taught her with something resembling impatience. They

described that sometimes, she did or said things that made things feel weird, and in a bad way.

"It's just... you know, that sounds kinda dirty."

"But not like the unclean dirty, like the privacy dirty?"

"Exactly," Mike responded. "I mean, you make me feel warm too, but that's not something you want the guys to hear. I think Will would literally kill me. I mean, not literally, but..."

El silently contemplated this new information. "Is it like a private couple thing?"

"Yes."

The intricacies of couples had been explained to El less than a week after she had reappeared. The two had been attached at the hip. They would hold hands whenever El felt unsafe, and hugs would linger. Will had been appalled by the behavior, saying something very obscene that Mike would later have to explain to El.

"Are we a couple?" she pressed.

Mike didn't answer for a very long time. "Couples go on dates. We haven't gone on any real dates."

With that, El understood. "We are friends. But, our friends are always with us when we go out, so we aren't a couple."

"Kinda." Mike remained quiet for a very long time. "We could be a couple. Like, a real couple. I mean, we never did get to go to the Snow Ball. And that would've been a date."

El moved closer in the yellow sleeping bag. "That would be nice."

There was another, more comfortable silence between the pair. El felt her eyes grow heavy. She laid her head on Mike's chest, feeling her head bob up and down with his even breathing. "Mike?" she whispered in her confused voice that was reserved for new words and feelings.

"Yes, El?"

"I think I'm sick," she whispered. She felt his heart race. "My tummy feels very funny."

"Oh," Mike breathed a sigh of relief. "Mine feels funny too. It's a couple thing."

"Oh," El sighed, smiling. "Good night, Mike."

"Good night."

0-0-0

Mike woke up past eight in the morning. He saw his clunky watch fastened around El's skinny wrist, but her long sleeves covered every number but the eight.

El's head was heavy with sleep against his chest. From his awkward angle, he could barely see her angelically-soft facial features past her short hair. He saw her long eyelashes which fluttered with the rhythm of her dreams. Her defined cheekbones caught the light beautifully, casting shadows and highlights in such a way that she looked twice her age, like a beautiful, matured woman. Her small hand was lightly curled into a fist that rested on his collarbone. The rest of her body remained inside the sleeping bag, which had been fitfully torn open by kicking and shifting in the night. Mike was suddenly made aware of the fact that she was not wearing a bra beneath Hopper's shirt as a chill wracked her body.

He was lured away from the siren song of teenage hormones when he felt his side throbbing. She had been a very fitful sleeper, and at some point in the night, had lashed out violently against him as if he was the monster that prowled her dreams.

As such, Mike was tired and sore.

He looked around the room groggily, blinking forcefully to get his bearings.

Sleeping in the basement had its perks during a sleepover. The guys were less likely to mess with his action figures. Holly never went

down to the basement by herself. The noise Nancy made when she bustled about in the morning was muted. His parents were less likely to barge in.

Yet the one downside was that a teasing ruckus could be made without anyone ever coming to Mike's rescue.

Dustin and Lucas came into focus as they sat eagerly on the couch. They acted like they were watching a movie that was both suspenseful and hard to stomach at the same time.

"You're so gross," Lucas stated, his camouflage bandana tied around his head, even at the ungodly early hour.

"You two are all like," Dustin paused, using his hands and figures to demonstrate their tangled bodies. He knotted his fingers together, wildly moving his hands about in an awkward demonstration.

Mike felt his lungs fill with a coating panic that kept him from breathing. Without moving, he looked around the room.

Shit, he thought to himself. "Where's Will?"

Mike suffered a horrible vision of his corpse, slain by Will the Wise.

El, to maximize the privacy of her existence, lived between the Hopper and Byers households. When Hopper was mysteriously absent in public, he would take his adopted daughter to Joyce, who would mother her until Hopper had business taken care of. It was a beautiful system that let El have a real family.

As such, Will had become a fiercely protective brother.

Not only had El saved him from certain death, yet she had grown into a very soft spot into his heart. If anyone ever said anything ill about Eleven, Will seemed to transform from a quiet kid to a silent killer.

Lucas smiled a wicked smile. "I don't know, Mike," he said, his voice practically reverberating with its volume. "I don't know where *Will* is."

"He's going to kill me if he wakes up!" Mike whispered harshly, trying

to keep from waking either of the sleeping siblings.

The look on Dustin's and Lucas's face read *exactly*.

Mike lifted up his free hand and made an obscene gesture.

He squirmed around, trying to face El in the bag that had gone from roomy to constricting overnight. "El. Come on, it's time to wake up."

No luck.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. "Do you want Eggos?"

The sleeping girl let out a soft sigh, squirming up Mike's chest. She remained heavy and motionless.

Dustin grinned. He jumped up and moved toward the television. Mike foresaw what he was about to do and tried to untangle himself from El. He gently laid her head onto the pillow they had been using then scrambled out of the sleeping bag, moving himself far away from her before Dustin turned on the T.V. and put it on full volume.

If looks could kill, Mike could have eradicated the Demogorgon.

He moved to the couch and slumped down onto it sulkily, crossing his arms in protest.

At the immense volume of the T.V., both El and Will started to stir. Will awoke first, taking in a deep, startled breath before half-jumping, half-rolling onto his side to look around. He stared at the guys, not seeming to understand what was going on.

El woke sleepily. Her big, beautiful eyes blinked like a tired owl's. She rose to her feet and immediately seated herself in Mike's lap, curling up to him before falling back asleep.

Double shit, Mike thought to himself as Will sprang up, glared at Mike, then stalked out of the room.

"Karma's a bitch, dude," Dustin laughed.

0-0-0

El had woken up to a terribly loud noise that startled her senseless. Once she regained sensation, she realized Mike was gone. The sleeping bag still held his smell, something El thought of as similar to the trees in autumn. There was little she had experienced in the world that didn't smell like metal and cleaner, and Mike held the most pleasant scent by far.

She found him sitting on the couch, so far away. Without thinking, she moved to him and flopped across his legs, throwing her bare knees over his thighs and burying her head into his neck. She searched to find more of the pine-needle smell, settling once she was satisfied.

Full consciousness came sometime later when she felt Mike gently shake her shoulder. "El, my parents will be up soon."

"Mm," she responded, caring little.

"They won't be happy if they come down here to see you like this."

She sat up, resting her head against the back of the couch. She craned her neck to look at his face. His freckles weren't visible against the redness of his cheeks. "Is it because this is too *couple-y* for them?" She successfully used an adjective, feeling proud of herself.

Mike nodded.

The T.V. continued to drone on noisily behind her. "Should I put it back upstairs?"

"If you want to. I mean, I can certainly get it so you don't have to strain your powers, I am getting stronger."

Lucas snickered.

As El levitated the T.V. off the ground, she focused immensely. She floated it up the stairs and through the open door, depositing it on the floor before releasing it gently. She didn't want Mike's parents to see her using her powers. Whether they knew or not was beyond her, but she feared that she might scare them either way.

Her head fluttered strangely as it often did after she exerted herself.

She wearily pulled herself up the stairs, taking a tissue from her pocket and blotting at the blood that dripped out.

"You're going to make the greatest housewife," Lucas stated in the background.

El, confused at the statement, ignored it.

"Shut the hell up," Mike retorted.

Before El could shake the light-headedness, Mike was beside her. He squeezed her hand before climbing the stairs. "I've got it now," he stated. He placed his hands firmly on the cart, pushing with great effort. The wheels squeaked in protest before it started moving.

Mike visibly strained as he fought to move it. He disappeared from view nearly ten seconds later.

El's head cleared and she moved to sit on the couch. She picked up the remains of the Supercom that sat beside the couch. "What do you think happened?"

She held up the chunks of plastic to Lucas, who shrugged. "I dunno. Whatever it was, it was seriously freaky."

A loud swear came from upstairs. El flew to the stairs, running up and readying herself to use another blast of telekinetic power.

Mike was hunched over his hand, bending forward into a tight ball.

"What happened?" Dustin shouted, wielding an empty mug over his head. He didn't seem to register that, had there been a real threat, the mug would only bounce off a monster and shatter on the floor. The most damage it could do would be if the shards had somehow been stepped on and lodged into the beast's foot.

"Fucking thing shocked me!" Mike said through clenched teeth, each word sounding like a struggle to not scream.

"Language!" his father warned as he moved downstairs from his bedroom. Ted moved through the anxious crowd of young teenagers, crouching down beside his son. "Now let me see that."

Mike made a noise from his chest before lifting off his injured hand.

El recoiled, moving to grab Will by his arm and hide her eyes in his shoulder.

His hand had been cooked by the wire, which lay crackling beneath the outlet. The cord singed through several layers of skin, leaving the outer layer a charred gray. Something angry bubbled beneath the surface, a clear fluid leaking out and flooding his palm. Smoke rose from the snake of the wire, rising from the ground and from Mike's hand.

Karen worriedly appeared at the foot of the stairs, holding Holly. She covered the curious toddler's eyes, quickly deciding to send her upstairs to play in her room before moving over. "Oh Michael. Was that cord frayed?"

"No!" Mike shouted, his frustration with his mother overriding his pain.

"Ted, I'm taking him to the hospital. Can you drive the boys and El home?"

Everyone protested.

"Can't we be there for emotional support?" Dustin asked as Ted tried to usher them downstairs.

Ted paused. Karen, too distracted by her son's trauma, was unable to argue before Ted shrugged. "Be dressed in five minutes."

Karen pulled Mike out the door and had him in the car, still in their nightwear, two minutes later.

El didn't understand what was going on. She turned to ask Will what was happening, knowing that he always had answers.

"Mike was probably being a dumbass and plugged the T.V. in wrong," he stated. "Raw electricity is dangerous and I think he got an electrical burn."

"Guys?" Lucas asked, calling everyone's attention. "Something tells me

there's something wrong here."

He pointed to the outlet by the still-smoldering cable. The electrical outlet covers that prevented curious Holly from getting a nasty surprise were still plugged into the slits.

Everyone exchanged glances of worry. A familiar feeling overcast the group like a raincloud so charged with electricity it could be felt in bones.

El took one last look at the cord before pushing at everyone with her mind, urging them downstairs. "We have to go see Mike," she stated, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Wait," Dustin stated, running back to the outlet. He cautiously unplugged the bottom outlet cover, looking up at the confused looks of everyone else. "We have to protect his parents. They'll flip if they have to know what we do."

0-0-0

A/N: This feels so good. I love writing, even if I'm not the best at it.

Note of the day: Please go and read *Sex Ed* by Phantasmoplast, it's genuinely the best *Stranger Things* fanfiction up yet, in my opinion.

3. Healer Campaign

A/N: This isn't really getting the response I was expecting. So many people have read this and followed it already, thank you so much!

On an off topic, I ended up getting sick as hell Thursday in class. I didn't go to morning classes yesterday, so the short length of time between the previous chapter and this chapter isn't something to expect. I'm very sorry.

0-0-0

"Close your hand," the doctor instructed.

Mike stared at his fingers like they were foreign beings that had wormed their way onto his body and anchored themselves into the flesh. He gritted his teeth and did as he was told, wincing as pain throbbed in his palm.

"Open it," the doctor said.

Something cracked beneath his skin and another series of vile fluids began to spill from the wound. "Ow!"

Mike's mother sat impatiently in one of the plain chairs of the emergency room. Her slippers *skiffed* impatiently as she tapped the floor. Mike could tell this was not the ideal way to spend the first entire day off of school. Her face was a somber mask of exhaustion that had settled too deep to be clearly visible on the surface.

"Mrs. Wheeler?" Dr. Pendleton asked, collecting his clipboard and flashlight. He repeated his question when she didn't respond.

"Yes?"

"Can I please speak to you out in the hallway?" he asked, moving towards the door as if she didn't have a choice.

Mike sighed and slouched against the back of the padded bed. He saw no reason why he should be hospitalized for a burn, put on an

IV, and forced to change into clothing made of paper.

Hours had passed at this point, or so it had seemed.

His hand felt nonexistent until he had to move it, when it would erupt into a spasming mess. He dared to look down at it again.

Each time he saw it, Mike felt like he was looking into an enchanted mirror that lied about the user's appearance. It was a black so grim it looked alien against his pale skin. He could never stomach more than a quick glance and always ended up looking away and distracting himself with something outside the squared hospital windows. He was thankful it wasn't his writing hand, or die-rolling hand. However, it was occasionally an Eleven hand-holding hand.

He grit his teeth, wondering what his new nickname would be at school. Troy was unaware of El's return, but by the gods, Mike wanted him to. Troy had stayed at bay since the quarry incident, but once he realized that the gang was back together, El having disappeared, he started up again. *Frogface might have a dick after all, look at what it did to that hand!*

"Mike?" Karen asked, settling herself down in the room.

Evidently, the news was going to be bad. Doctors never looked children in the face and explained to them what their problems were. It was always that the kids would somehow cope better if someone they knew and loved explained to them how bad things were.

"Your friends are here," she responded after a hesitant silence. "Should I bring them in?"

"I want you to tell me what's going on first," he almost snapped. He was thirteen, not three.

Karen looked around the room, avoiding Mike's figure in the bed. "You have a third degree electrical burn. And you could need a graft to make it... look better. And you will need surgery to remove the dead skin."

Mike was stunned.

"Why the hell would you go playing with a frayed cord like that? I thought you knew about--"

"Jesus, Mom! It wasn't frayed!"

"Michael, enough!" Karen snapped, her frizzy hair flouncing as she threw her hands down, exasperated. "This is going to be very expensive and if you had used some goddamn common sense, we wouldn't be in this situation!"

"Go home! Look at it! I've been winning science fairs since fourth grade, and I would've known to not touch a frayed wire!"

Karen's shoulders slumped. Secretly, she knew that. Mike knew that she knew that. Karen understood that something unnatural was happening. She knew something was wrong with Will's return, and something was wrong with El. But this time, the horrors were striking close to home and Mike *knew* she was pissed only because she couldn't pretend to stay oblivious.

The cord had been in his fist for at least three seconds before it delivered a nasty bite. Had this been normal, he would've lost the fingers that first touched it, not his entire hand. Hell, had this been normal, he would've felt a slight tingle of pain before jerking away, like touching a power switch that had built up a charge.

Mike, beyond frustrated, looked down at his hand again. He studied the intense array of grays. Something red sat at the deepest point of the wound, but was clogged over with dead tissue. He stared at it, opting to keep his eyes on it rather than look his mother, risking being sick over feeling mortal than feeling betrayed.

0-0-0

Ted sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses. The four kids sat on the edges of their seats, waiting to hear him talk. They had been waiting to barge into the emergency room for nearly a half an hour.

El stared at Ted as he paced around the room. He wanted to say something, but also, didn't.

"Mr. Wheeler?" Dustin piped up, oblivious to the tension that even El could feel. He was such a burning optimist that it pained everyone around him, especially Lucas. El thought it sweet and endearing.

"Yes, Dustin?" he asked after a cough that had cleared away a lump in his throat.

"What's wrong with Mike?"

Ted took off his glasses and looked around, looking like he was searching for an easy answer to be written on the ceiling or dull, yellow walls. "He will need surgery."

El raised her eyebrows. Surgery was used to treat serious things. Things that were wrong inside, not outside. "Can we go and see him now?"

Mike's father looked grateful to disappear back into the room. After an unnecessarily long time, he walked back out to say yes.

Dustin jumped up and ran inside. El, while normally content with watching his hyper antics, followed him like a shadow.

Mike sat up and smiled, El taking hold of his good hand and squeezing it, savoring what she could have very easily lost. His hands were almost always cold, sometimes sweaty, but they were always pleasant to feel. He smiled again, his freckles that had been evident in his pale state quickly disappearing beneath a shade of red. Anytime that El acted couple-y around anyone, he would 'blush' like that. El thought it was adorable.

She sat herself beside him. "What is wrong?" El asked.

Mike lifted up his hand. "This."

El winced looking at it. Pieces of plastic cord wrapping had seared themselves to his hand, but had been cleaned out since he arrived. "Is the doctor going to make it better?"

"There's not really much that can be done. Except make it look not ugly."

El wanted to touch it, to make it feel better. "Does it hurt?"

"Just around the edges. My skin is dead in the middle."

The boys started talking, loudly and lewdly as young teenage boys often do.

El shuffled closer, grabbing his attention. "Mike."

He looked over at her again. She outstretched her hand, pointing at his wrist. "Let me see."

"Oh shit, I bet she can use her powers!" Dustin whispered excitedly, whispering from amazement and not out of being discrete.

She nodded.

"What are you talking about? She kills people, not makes them better." Lucas cynically crossed his arms and sat against the back of his couch.

Mike remained silent for a moment. "Will, you started campaigning as a healer. You should understand the science behind this."

Will just nodded silently.

Dustin stared at Will for a second, confused. He then sprang to his feet, smiling. "Oh yeah! El, this is serious. When you heal, you have to channel your energy into getting rid of the bad stuff and spreading the good stuff. So like, you have to sew his hand shut."

Lucas rolled his eyes. "You can't create something from nothing, dumbass. First Law of Thermodynamics."

"But what if she can change things, like healers? She could turn the dead skin into healthy skin." Dustin began an argument that El would tune out, sinking lower against the bed as they grew louder.

"Relax," Mike laughed. "At this point, my parents won't understand what they're talking about. You aren't even in the equation anymore."

El nodded, understanding. "Let me see."

Mike moved the oozing mass of over to her. El sucked in a breath, though quickly overcame her fear of the injury. Nothing would ever compare to her sheer horror when she found the corpse of Barbara, a slimy creature being born from her mouth, her skin pale, eyes gray. This burn was nothing.

She concentrated, looking at the wound. She searched for something inside the burn to connect to, something that she could use. There was always a way for her to grab onto something, to sling it elsewhere like a ragdoll. She was not proud of it, but she had hurt the bad people by throwing their brains around in their cases. She threw the Demogorgon to another dimension, even though she had to go with it.

There were two pieces in his hand that couldn't reach each other. She grabbed one and tried to stretch it to join the other, Mike making a very, very faint noise of discomfort that was almost inaudible against the background dispute. They couldn't reach. The next two couldn't reach.

Neither could the next two.

She felt his heartbeat, the moving of millions of individual cells that bustled constantly in and beneath his skin. There wasn't anything to latch onto, at least not anything that she could identify as the problem. "Gone. Everything is gone. I can't fix it."

El sulked back into the chair that she had pulled to the edge of the bed, yet had previously been neglecting to be closer to Mike.

"It's okay," Mike said quickly, reaching for her shoulder. "Stay up here, with me."

She happily complied, moving back close to Mike again. She wrinkled her nose at the sight of his nasty paper gown. Beneath the crinkly outfit, she could see a tangle of bright wires connecting him to a machine.

El didn't like the smell of the hospital. She didn't like it at all. It smelled sterile, like chemical cleaners and coldness.

Footsteps echoed in the hallway, the sounds of tough leather shoes hitting against the cold tile. Everything was quiet, and the beeping of Mike's heart monitor grew louder and louder until—

Something was hooked up to El's head. It felt very strange. It was a mess of wires and sticky things that stuck on her temples, to the skin beneath her short hair. She had to wear these many times before, but this one felt different.

On this day, they shocked her.

Papa had made her float a simple, empty box off the table.

A nasty, nasty feeling hit her hard in the temples. It was a pain that she felt beneath her skin, not on top or penetrating in, but inside like a parasite trying to break free. The jolt lasted a meager few seconds, but the damage had been done.

Blood poured from her nose. She grew pale and collapsed forward onto the table, completely unconscious.

The box, tragically, did not survive.

0-0-0

With wonder, the men stared at the slumped figure of Test Subject Number Eleven. The box had been crushed beneath the sheer power of her power.

It lay several feet away from the table, flung away at the moment she had received the goading shock. It was crumpled and ugly, many of the fibers torn out from its corpse and strewn around the room in an eerie, perfect circle around her chair.

There were several minutes of silence as people recorded the vitals of the test subject. Brain waves had been meticulously plotted over several machines. Workers in white lab coats highlighted several regions of spikes in alpha brain waves, stark red mountains against the blackness of the screen.

The girl's false father figure moved into the room to gently rouse her.

Faces went white upon seeing the child as she was raised up.

The most valuable resource that the government had discovered in a very, very long time had a massive stream of blood running from her nose. The entirety of the right side of her paled face, which she had collapsed onto, was covered in scarlet. Drips of blood ran from her chin onto the floor, coating her gown and the tabletop. She had lost a lot and urgently needed medical care, which was called.

At the computer, the lead technicians began writing furiously in their notes: "When Test Subject Number Eleven is exerting power, do not harm."

0-0-0

El stayed in her fog for a very long time.

There were times when it seemed Mike worried about her. She would stay inside her head while everything else passed around her. At first, Lucas would say very unkind things, especially after she first turned up. Dustin would be just as insensitive, just unaware of his cruelty.

However, Will worried the most out of the group.

He had rarely witnessed her odd episodes like this. When they occurred, he would wonder of what she was thinking of. He could never empathize as to what life was like in the labs.

But when she saw the Upside Down, he would know.

When she saw the Upside Down, she would go tense. Her blood would disappear from her face, from her fingers, and would hide somewhere else in her body. Will knew, because the exact things happened to him. Days when she saw the Upside Down would be plagued by a silence that was unnatural, even for her. Nights when it came to her in dreams would be marked by her getting up and ending up in Joyce's bed by the morning. He knew everything that went through her head, because he saw it too.

"Hey El?" Will spoke up over the bickering children beside him.

There were days when he was glad that Dustin and Lucas remained as childish as ever in their own ways. Rarely, he would be jealous. While they had seen shit, they hadn't lived through it.

Today was a jealous day.

Although, thankfully, today wasn't an Upside Down day.

"Guys, would you shut it?" Will snapped.

Dustin's mouth hung open before he snapped it shut, his jaw clicking audibly.

"El?" Mike asked, placing a hand on his shoulder and shaking her.

She looked up, her wide eyes meeting Will's. "Yes?"

"You fell asleep again."

"Oh."

Mike looked down at his hand again. Will noticed that he had done that a lot in the few hours that they had spent there. He would be going into surgery very, very soon, as soon as his doctors finished filing paperwork and whatnot.

"Will your surgery hurt?" El asked.

"I don't know. I've never had it. I mean, I assume it won't, because they're getting rid of everything... well, I don't know. They might take skin from somewhere else on my body to put it on my hand, and I think that won't feel too great."

El looked visibly pained.

Will wanted to get up and hug her and let her know it wouldn't be that bad.

Before he knew what was happening, Will looked up to see the lights flickering wildly. Mike's monitor, deprived of electricity, started to make a whirring noise.

Mike made a noise even louder in the back of his throat.

Complete blackness came, and when the lights finally returned, El had slumped over with exhaustion onto his shoulder. She didn't seem

to have the energy to wipe her nose, but she managed.

For the thirtieth time that day, Mike looked down at his hand. It was still ugly, but the giant, gaping hole in the center had closed. The blackness was gone just the way that the portal to the Upside Down had been closed months ago.

0-0-0

"I think a storm is coming," the doctor said, looking off into the distance. "The lights were acting up in my office."

The door slammed shut. Dr. Pendleton looked around the room, looking at the vitals monitor that continued to act up. He went to readjust the wires attached to Mike before stopping.

"Strange," he said beneath his breath. "I think I may have made a misdiagnosis. This appears to have closed up already. Let me just..."

The doctor looked around. His head caught the overhead lights and reflected them like a great mirror. El watched his every move from her motionless slouch in the chair, too tired to worry if he would be suspicious.

Dr. Pendleton was the type to not like being wrong, she could tell. His eyebrows bunched together. He scratched at the corner where his jawbone met his skull, his tongue moving to cause a bump in his cheek. "This appears to have..."

Mike's eyes watched Dr. Pendleton as he fidgeted uncomfortably.

"This is only second-degree; it seems..." He took out a pen from his pocket, took Mike's hand, and whacked the pen lightly against the burn.

"Ow!"

"Sensation has resurfaced. The nerves aren't dead..."

Dr. Pendleton scribbled something down, then left the room, presumably to find Mike's parents, who had disappeared to de-stress.

Will looked at El, his eyes wide. "What did you do?"

"I made them reach."

0-0-0

A/N: I'm sorry I'm a bad writer. I promise this will get better. I'll make Mike and El cuter and awkward-er together, but I really didn't want to add anything cute to this chapter. Total filler chapter, and one without fluff to say the least.

Today's rec: I just finished *A Clockwork Orange* for a class. It was amazing, I highly recommend it to those who aren't sensitive.

4. Power Tower

A/N: As I stated at the bottom of the first chapter, fanfiction doesn't like my stupid computer's line breaks so I spent forever trying to fix that. My other chapters now have line breaks so everything flows as I expected it to. Please, if the points of view were at all confusing earlier, go back and re-read them. Every chapter that I write is third-person and thoughts and overall style flow with the character whose point of view I use, so my writing improves infinitely when my computer works.

Anyway, I still don't own this.

0-0-0

There was no sign of a storm on the horizon, contrary to the doctor's fear. Mike would have loved for a storm to approach and give him some new scenery. Being a very young teenager, he had yet to have all his energy sapped by high school and hormones, so sitting still was impossible. It was boring and repetitive. Everything about the hospital was like a hellish labyrinth from some forbidden dungeon where everything was so... *the same* that it drove the explorer into insanity. All the rooms smelled like metal and the cleaner that bleached it. Each room had scratchy, ugly beds and whirring machines and hideous flooring and wallpaper.

However, not every room had a juvenile who defied all odds and survived in an alternate dimension.

Hell, his room had two.

After sitting in the room for an ungodly amount of time (which had totaled to six hours), even Will had started to fidget like everyone else, despite his demeanor.

Mike's parents had returned at some time during the haze of repetitiveness, putting a stop to any sort of material conversation. Ted was so strict about language that anything above the Biblical version of 'hell' was considered too inappropriate, effectively killing all normal banter. Their presence also interfered with any sort of

strategic planning that they may have undergone to combat whatever was in the radio.

Despite how calm the child normally was, Holly was also growing restless, going from scribbling on a notepad Mike's mom had provided to going into a boredom-induced rush. She dashed madly from one end of the room to the other, occasionally diving beneath Mike's bed, shrieking all the while. Had Nancy not had her fill of a visit earlier, Mike would have strangled himself with the wires that remained leeches to his chest.

"Moooooom," he cried out in defeat.

"Holly!" she snapped. "Mike, we're trying to keep her under control. I promise, as soon as the doctors tell you that you can go home, we'll leave. And we can even take everyone out to dinner for—"

Whatever she may have been about to say was muffled by a collective cheer. The crowded room was most definitely violating some sort of fire code, but oddly enough, no doctors, or even nurses, had been by to check up on everything.

Admitted at 8:37 in the morning, Mike occasionally glanced at the clock mounted on the wall that he tried desperately to ignore. It was twenty-three minutes later before his friends arrived.

They left again at 12:31 exactly, just as his food had arrived. They played that the smell had driven them out, but were moving to the cafeteria to consume the exact array of colorless chicken and anemic vegetables.

At 1:02 exactly, everyone returned.

Then, exactly six hours later, at 2:37, a nurse ducked into the room, her hair visibly frayed and face distraught.

"Wheeler family," she greeted. It took a second for her to register the sheer population of the room. "And friends. We've had a bit of chaos today; our vitals machines keep going under. Thankfully, our facility doesn't have the money to computerize all of our records, so we don't have to worry about those crashing, god knows what a nightmare

that would be. Anyway!

"Mike, you're free to go. I have a care package here for your hand. Dr. Pendleton doesn't want you covering it with anything, or touching anything, for as long as it takes to heal. Put on these medications three times a day each, don't wear anything that might irritate the skin..."

Mike took the package that was being offered to him. He sighed, knowing that he would be unable to bike for a while, or at least with competence.

El rose to her feet, having barely moved since she had come back from lunch. She had on an outfit resembling the one he had worn going into the hospital, wearing the t-shirt she had brought for that day and a pair of sweatpants that she had replaced her pajama bottoms with. Mike felt a surge of pride at seeing the soda stain that was near her left knee, indicating they were his.

"Can I please take a shower?" she asked. Since her return, she had become obsessively clean. While she still clearly associated the word 'bath' with torturous visions, she clearly enjoyed hot baths and long showers, often spending twenty minutes cleansing herself when she visited.

"Sure, honey. How about we drop you off at your home, though? You can get some new clothes," Mike's mom offered, her face struggling to stay kind and patient as she tried to herd Holly out from beneath the bed. The toddler made an evilly high noise and Mike heard something hit the bottom of his bed.

El nodded.

"Mrs. Wheeler?" Dustin asked, his face smiling for some unknown reason.

"Yes, Dustin?" she asked, her voice growing less patient. She finally seized the toddler by the wrist and pulled her out.

"I'm not feeling too great, I think this hospital atmosphere is making me sick. I kinda just wanna stay home tonight, despite your most

gracious offer."

Mike tensed. Whenever his friends used big words that weren't of scientific origin, they were playing at some awful game.

"I'm feeling the same, oddly enough," Lucas said mere milliseconds after Dustin quieted.

Mike's mom smiled brightly, nodding. She had not only conquered the toddler but had saved herself a dinner surrounded by teenage boys. "Sure, kids. We'll have to have you over sometime soon, though." That was Mom-language for *when there's a day better than this*.

The scheme dawned on him like an approaching train dawned on a deer on railroad tracks.

Will slumped over in his chair, crossing his arms. His face registered a storm of emotions somewhere between pissed and annoyed. "Yeah. Me too."

His short response was the final affirmation that Mike needed. Lucas and Dustin had conspired to leave Will as the third wheel, who would back out instantly, leaving Mike and El on a date. *Jesus, I hope they didn't hear us talking last night*.

Holly screeched with joy as she was half-handed, half-thrown to Ted. He left to fight to strap her into her seat and hopefully only cause a delay of a few minutes.

"Well, that's perfectly fine. I sure hope you boys feel better soon," Mike's mom said, a tint of confusion staining her voice before she smiled. "Mike and El can enjoy some time alone then."

The world hated Mike Wheeler.

0-0-0

"Okay!" Mrs. Wheeler said, clapping her hands together excitedly before hugging El's new mom goodbye. "We'll see you at six."

Mrs. Wheeler walked back to the car, clearly discomforted by her

lack of real shoes as she treacherously crossed the gravel driveway. Mike was sitting in the front seat, waving excitedly.

Will had stalked inside the moment he was dropped off, but not before giving his mom a tight hug. That left El and her mom waving goodbye as the car they had taken turned around on the rocks and drove off.

El faced her mom, smiling. She froze when a new emotion was displayed on her features, one that looked like a smile but also almost looked like a tearful face. "Mama?" she asked.

"Oh my little girl," she exclaimed, collapsing onto El in yet another embrace of the day.

"Am I in trouble?" El asked, her voice hushed. She still had a very conceptual grasp on what was right and what would constitute a scolding. Previously, El had been unaware that going on walks without announcing where she was going or that feeding the dog Eggos was a bad thing to do. For all she knew, she had done another bad thing.

"No!" her mama replied, laughing. "You're going on your first date. You're growing up so fast."

El looked down at the ground, somewhat confused. She had only grown a little taller since she first met her mama. But then she recognized that what was being said was a figure of speech.

She smiled at her mama then moved inside, moving with a visible spring in her step. She moved straight to her new room, which belonged exclusively to her when she was here and to Will when she wasn't. When she was here, Will lived in Jonathan's room, who was too busy working as a freelance photographer to cause much spatial conflict.

Her wardrobe had expanded from an old pink dress and a jean jacket to several more pale dresses, with oversized sweaters and loose jeans. Summer was drawing closer, so new, breathable shirts colored in pastels had been stocked as well. Most clothes at her mama's house came from thrift stores or Nancy, who adored El.

For the first time in her life, however, she was unable to decide what she should wear.

Many people seemed to worry about how they looked in public. El just found something in the morning that was clean and popped it on, remembering that she was still pretty. Yet today, she felt oddly pressured into looking nice.

She thought little of it, thinking that her head was just confused that she was getting ready so late. She settled on grabbing a dress that was pinstriped diagonally like a multicolored zebra. It was light tan and pink and blue, and was her favorite dress to wear when she was outside in the warming sun.

She happily brought it to the bathroom, stopping when Will stood in front of the door. She was reminded of days when Dungeon Master Mike would describe enormous guards who blocked access to something vital that the party needed. "Will? Are you mad?"

His displeased face melted and he dropped his arms. "No. But are you really going on a date? With Mike?"

El, wide-eyed, shrugged. "Mrs. Wheeler. She will be there."

Will sighed. "Okay."

He moved to the side and let her in, if reluctantly. El placed her chin on his shoulder in an armless hug before walking inside.

The door creaked shut slowly and El bunched the dress closer to her chest. She stared around the small room, delicately padding across the shower mat to the towel rack. She slung her dress over the bar, feeling her heart skip a bit at the thought of the dress's importance. She carefully readjusted it to make sure it was comfortable before undressing and beginning her shower.

There was little she had come to appreciate more than being allowed to stand under the streams of water, uninterrupted. The room became humid, droplets of vapor sticking to the yellowing shower curtain.

Everything about the shower was unlike her past life. It was warm and private. She had no strict schedule to follow. Most importantly,

the shower was filled with wonderful smells that were so unlike the metallic scent that eternally hung over her head in the labs.

El was aware that she had plenty of time before her dinner with Mike, yet she still felt a little rushed. She had to make sure that everything was perfect. So, she stepped out into the cooling room after a mere ten minutes and began to dry off.

In agony, she stood in front of the fogged mirror as she fussed with her hair. There was always a small strand somewhere that would stick up, which she would frown at and force down with a comb. It was only until after she had her hair fixed did she realize she would mess it all up again getting her dress on.

0-0-0

Mike stared down at his hand yet again. For some reason, El had been able to completely restore function to his hand, even if it was painful. He was almost sure she had reattached damaged nerve sites somehow. When he returned to Hawkins Middle School for his last year there, he would be sure to consult Mr. Clarke on nerve damage and theoretical repairs for it.

Yet the hand was the least of his concerns now.

His Supercom was still useless as ever. He had to think of a way to tell his parents about it, and they wouldn't be happy. It had been a very expensive present after he and his friends had won the most recent science fair. But more importantly, there was no way that he would be able to get into contact with his friends when he needed them. Now would have been a great time to curse Lucas and Dustin out for leaving him in this situation.

His mother seemed oblivious to the fact that he was going on a date. She seemed to be of the belief that he was stuck in the friend zone, as evident that she was allowed to even set foot in the house. In the back of his mind, he was thankful that his mom believed he had no luck with women.

Thus, he was stuck between trying to look casual to keep his mom clueless and trying to look his best for El.

After sorting through several sets of t-shirts, he went digging through the top layer of his laundry. He hoped he could salvage something that smelled fresh. Mike smiled as he held up a black polo, yet the smile weakened, then dropped when he saw the wrinkles cursing it. He gave up on the laundry and returned to his clean clothing, sighing.

Defeated, he decided that a dingy shirt was better than a wrinkled one, much less one that smelled like a teenage boy.

Outside, the summer day stayed sunny as ever. It would be a long time before Mike Wheeler longed to see a fall day, if he ever did.

Summer was beautiful and warm, with long days, free of school (which meant, mostly free of bullies) and filled with friendship. The cold, damp days of fall that left the feeling of eternal dampness in the bones would have a new definition of suffering to him and his friends. Once he was dressed, he decided it was a perfect day to step outside and enjoy it.

Central Indiana was not known for its dry summers. Stepping outside was like walking through a semi-permeable wall of agarose gel. Almost instantly, the humidity sank into Mike's thick mass of hair and made him regret his decision to enjoy the summer.

Yet returning inside would be sentencing him to boredom that would bring nervous thoughts.

Biking would leave him well-worthy of a shower, so Mike wrapped around the front of his house and moved to his backyard. Walking was always fun anyway.

He stopped just short of the tree line and looked up, looking at the blue sky. A few white, lazy clouds hung in the sky. Still knowing Indiana all too well, Mike was half-expecting them to split open and pour sheets of rain onto the town within a few minutes. After being trapped in the hospital for hours untold, he would never again take for granted how beautiful an open world was.

"Michael! Get back in here!"

"Mom!" Mike responded, throwing up his hands. "I'm not walking on my hands, what can I do to hurt it?"

She crossed her arms in the door frame of the basement, glaring daggers. "You could trip and try to catch yourself and tear that thing wide open. I said, get back in here!" she repeated, her voice growing more annoyed.

Mike clenched his fists, winced, then weakly moved to walk inside.

He paused in the door frame, watching his mom as she ascended the stairs. Before he stepped inside, he glanced out at the un-explorable beauty. He felt a cold bite of adrenaline punch his nerves as he saw the electrical tower in the distance.

Blinking, he squinted, then rubbed his eyes.

For a split second, he thought he had seen something about the tower shifting. Not something on the tower or the tower itself, but oddly, something inside it. He blinked again, shading his eyes against the intense sunlight.

Oddly enough, whatever he had thought he had seen was gone.

Mike shook his head, deciding that melting his brain with comics would be a good idea. He trudged up to his room, the tops of his feet slapping against the edges of the stairs with every step.

Nancy's door was closed, an indicator that she was either here and didn't want to be bothered or was away and didn't want Holly messing with her stuff. He thought for a split-second before moving to her door and knocking.

There was a calamitous noise from the other side of the door, something like fumbling and a few muffled swears. "Just a second!" her voice came hurriedly.

Mike sighed, crossing his arms. "Nancy, how long can this take?"

She opened the door, huffing. Her hair was in a frayed mess, her clothes messy. "Jesus, Mike, what do you want?"

Her curtains blew in a gust of wind through the widely-opened window. Mike tried to subtly glance at the electric tower, but the gusting curtains blocked it. "Um. So."

There was a long, awkward moment of silence as Nancy appeared not to breathe at all.

"You're a girl."

Nancy raised her eyebrows, shoulders sinking. "Yes."

"So you know stuff about curls."

Nancy nodded, clearly not understanding what Mike was getting at.

But then again, he didn't either.

"Um. What do girls like?" he asked, shuffling from one foot to another.

She looked around like she was expecting Mike to have something controlling him. She continued to stare before her face melted into a face that she had never held in front of him before. It seemed like pride.

"You're going on a date with El."

"What? No!... Alright, yeah. Kinda."

Nancy smirked, then looked like realization hit her with a baseball bat in the face. "Stay right there for five seconds."

The door slammed in his face.

Off in the distance, he listened for the sound of his dad telling him to stop slamming doors. He must not have been home yet, because the reproach did not come.

Mike blinked and the door had opened again.

Nancy fixed her hair as she hurried him inside. "Normally you wouldn't be in here, but this is important. El is such a sweetheart so

I'm going to make sure you look awesome for her. And not to mention, you have to look like you're related to me for once..."

She rambled on as Mike tuned her out, trying not to feel offended.

A pair of fingers snapped in his face. "Earth to Planet Mike."

"What?" he asked.

Nancy was holding a thin comb. "Brush your hair out. It's a royal mess."

"You're one to talk," Mike stated offhandedly, smirking as her face turned red. He had put the pieces together. He was once again glad that his mom was so oblivious to her children's romantic lives. While it was kind of gross that she and her boyfriend had been messing around minutes before, he kept himself distracted with the idea of El.

He undid all possible tangles that he didn't catch earlier, placing the comb back onto the bed stand.

"That's not combed."

Mike frowned. "It isn't tangled."

"But you have a mane."

"El likes it like this."

"She probably doesn't say anything because she's too awkward about it."

"We both know she says whatever the hell comes to her mind," Mike interjected. Nancy didn't seek to argue. "And she says she loves it like this, she's said she loves it--"

He stopped himself before he said anything else. At this point, the two were both going to embarrass themselves beyond all reconciliation.

Mike was readied in near silence, except for Nancy's explanations about feminine attractions. If anything else was said, something

about a boyfriend or a sort-of-girlfriend would slip.

"Nancy? We promised to be honest with each other. So... do you think that... you know, El and I really have a shot?"

Nancy shrugged. "She is a little... inexperienced about human affairs. She doesn't really know what she's doing in this world, at it's cute and pathetic at the same time. But, I think, despite her complete obliviousness, yes."

Mike smiled, staring into the mirror. He had been spruced up quite a bit. Who had known that subtle fixes of the collar could have made him look less gangly?

"And," Nancy continued. "The way she looks at you is like something she never looks at before. She can't hide her feelings about anything, especially when they're strong. Jesus, listen to me. Getting all misty over my gross-ass little brother's love life."

Mike laughed.

He glanced at the clock by her bed. It read 6:18. "I should head downstairs," he breathed, a bit of stress leaking into his voice.

His mother was walking around with Holly shadowing her heels. "Ma!" she said.

Holly was ignored as she sighed, moving to grab the telephone from the hook.

Mike's heart seized as she began talking to Ms. Byers. "Yes, we're going to be there soon."

He felt his heart flutter back to life. He rechecked his outfit, rechecking the room out of worry. Nothing was out of the ordinary.

"Great! I'll get everyone into the car and—"

Did she just say everyone? Mike thought.

0-0-0

A/N: I live in Indiana. You can't tell, can you?

I'm so sorry. I'm very very busy. I swear I'm trying to fit some actual meat into this story instead of fluff, and it's there, and it only takes a little looking. This will get scary and this will have much more cute Mike and El stuff.

And poor, poor Mike, having his entire family joining his date.

5. The Alien Machine

A/N: I'm sorry I've been away for so long, I've been very busy.

To compensate, I have strived to place as much into this chapter as possible without making it unbearable.

Cookie points to whatever reader guesses who the restaurant/hostess is modeled after.

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El looked up at the painted sign sitting precariously above the entrance to a restaurant. *Nicky's*, it read. She continued staring for a few moments before frowning and stepping away from the door. She looked around, wishing she had a clock. Her mama stood near the street, placing her keys into different departments of her purse to keep from standing still. It was a stifling summer day, and even at this time, it was humid and hot as ever.

From either direction, cars came and went like the occasional bumblebee, clunky and taking their time.

None of the cars belonged to Mike's parents.

El was a master of occupying herself when there was little available. For days that seemed to stretch on forever, she would stare at tile ceilings and wait for her next time she became –

0-0-0

Experiment number six hundred and two –

0-0-0

– occupied. And she would think. Her mind had no difficulty keeping focus, so for hours, she would often think of the same thing. She would take a concept of something she was familiar with, like her drawings she had made of her and Papa. She would look at the sheet, then memorize it until she had a perfect picture in her head. She would strip it down to what Mike's friends called the molecular level,

the tiniest level that one could think of something at.

At the time, she was tearing down a lamppost across the street. She started with the lightbulb. She worked her way down the simple metal post until the lightbulb strangely flickered on, despite the persisting summer day.

The moment she noticed just how out of place an active lightbulb was, the familiar car pulled up to the curb and parked with a jerkiness that suggested Nancy was driving.

El looked at it and saw her prediction was correct. She smiled and adjusted her dress, almost walking into oncoming traffic before remembering she had to check streets before crossing them. She waited for the nearest car before moving with a speed that was unfitting of her calm demeanor.

"Mike." Not asking, not telling, just saying his name.

Mrs. Wheeler smiled, pointing behind her passenger seat. El got on her tiptoes to glance into the minivan, but Mike had magically appeared at her side.

"Hi El!" He cleared his throat and sucked in an audible breath. "I mean um, hi El."

"Hello Mike," El said.

Mike moved his hand out and El almost took it, but he stuck his elbow out instead. El wrinkled her eyebrows together and tried to stretch her hand across his chest to take it, but Mike just laughed. "No, do it like this."

He took her arm and bent it and linked their arms together, smiling.

On the other side of the street, she saw her mama and Mrs. Wheeler talking amiably. Nancy walked down the street and disappeared into a store. Holly buzzed visibly before Mr. Wheeler scooped her up and presumably moved to take her to a park somewhere. They were left with just their mothers.

Mike seemed relieved.

"I'm sorry, we don't have the chance to go out much, and I didn't know if this was the right restaurant," her mama's voice said.

"No, this is the place. I picked it because it's right next to the arcade, if they want to run off after they're done eating." Mrs. Wheeler, seemingly proud of her insight into the teenager's lives, pointed at the building next door.

El frowned when Mike awkwardly tore his arm from hers. She wondered if she was doing something wrong, but then smiled when he had rushed to the door to hold it open for her.

She missed the nice man whose diner she had ended up in when she first escaped. She felt bad for Mr. Benny every day, and seeing the layout of *Nicky's* only made it worse. It had the same window peering into the kitchen that was filled with metallic cookery. Yet the feeling slowly faded as she looked around at the red carpeting and dim lighting.

El didn't move until she felt Mike tugging on her arm again to lead her further into the building. A lady with a frazzled mess of hair sat behind a podium, smiling weakly.

"Hey guys," she said, her voice scratchy. "Is it just the two of you today?"

El shook her head. "No. Our moms are here too."

The woman nodded overenthusiastically and wrote something down. "So four."

"Yes please!" Mike piped up, almost screeching. He looked down at his feet.

El was led on by Mike, who followed the woman. They wove between tables into the farthest corner of the restaurant, seemingly tucked away from the world behind the ceiling-high booth walls. El had to hop to get up into the booth. She scooted all the way down to allot room for Mike, who seemed to trip over his own feet as he awkwardly tried to maneuver in.

Mrs. Wheeler and El's mama sat across from them, exchanging a

glance. El never understood parent-talk, but she could assume this had something to do with their seating choices.

Did they not like booths?

For a moment, everything was quiet as their mothers settled themselves.

"That woman seemed a little unsavory," Mrs. Wheeler started off the conversation. "Seemed like... you know, one of those people."

"She seems nice," El stated. "What did she do to seem mean?"

Mrs. Wheeler's expression changed slightly. She glanced over at El's mama.

Her mama sighed, looking at her hands. "Mrs. Wheeler could mean a lot of things, but I think she's feeling something. Some bad people, and even sometimes some good people, just make other people feel wrong, sweetie."

El nodded, understanding. Her former papa, in comparison to everyone else in her life, felt different.

The waiter came around to the table a few moments later, asking for drinks. Mike ordered a soda, one which El had yet to try, so she ordered the same. El's mama just wanted a water, and Mrs. Wheeler asked if they had a wine list.

"Nope. No alcohol here," the waiter tatted off. Mrs. Wheeler seemed to go along with that, even if she seemed annoyed.

El took a menu from the waiter as he patiently awaited Mrs. Wheeler's new choice. She unfolded it, almost intimidated by the sheer amount of words. Living between her mama and Hopper, she had a fairly consistent access to simpler words, but never words like 'fettucine'.

"Mike?" she asked quietly, as Mrs. Wheeler and her mama had begun to chatter lightly.

"Hm?" he asked, taking his eyes off the menu and smiling heartedly.

"What is... fett-oo-sine?" she asked. He looked confused, so El leaned across the table and looked for the word again in his menu. "That word."

"Oh. Fettucine," he said, pronouncing it weird. "It's Italian. You know, it's like Spanish, but it's another different language entirely. So it's pronounced different than it looks to English-speakers. But, um, the food, it's like spaghetti, but different."

El nodded. She had already made her decision. It wasn't breakfast food, but she had learned it was generally not normal to ask for waffles every meal of the day.

"Are you sure, Ellie?" her mama asked, using the name she and Hopper used more often than El. It felt nice, having a real name. "That's kind of expensive."

"Nonsense, Joyce," Mrs. Wheeler cut in. "I can cover it." El's mama seemed about ready to interject, but Mrs. Wheeler kept talking. "That's only if the next time the boys have a sleepover, it's at your house."

Her mama smiled and nodded. "Sure, sure. They don't have a ton of room in the house, so they'll probably spend it in the revamped Castle Byers. Joke's on you, I've got a quiet night ahead of me either way."

There was silence again.

"But I'm having Jonathan babysit. And he'll have plenty of back-up in case those coyotes come nosing around again."

Everyone had a very odd way of dealing with the events that had transpired so long ago. El, having learned that it was not okay to talk about monsters in public (as most people don't believe in them), had just avoided talking about them entirely. Her mama blamed the fuss on coyotes and the government, much like Hopper. Everyone had their own way of coping.

Mrs. Wheeler, for instance, had difficulty grasping the concepts of what had transpired, and therefore just went along with the vague

mentions that were given. "They've probably been nosing around our house, too. I think they've somehow gotten into the electrical box we have out back, our power's been malfunctioning recently."

Mike tensed with El. El tried to 'remain casual' as her friends had taught her. Remaining casual avoided questions and trouble.

Thankfully, the waiter appeared again to deliver drinks and ask for entrée selections.

"I'm just having a salad, thank you," El's mama said.

Mrs. Wheeler said something that sounded foreign, like fettucine. Mike asked for a burger.

"Can I have the... fettucine, please?" El asked after a fractioned hesitation.

"Of course," the waiter said, collecting the menus and scurrying back to the kitchen.

Mike took a sip of his drink. El looked at hers in suspicion, forgetting the name. "What is the name of this, again, Mike?"

"Mountain Dew."

In all of the time that she had lived with Hopper and her mama, El rarely had sodas. When she did, she had the strict limit of one a day. Her mama said they were addictive and Hopper said it was too expensive to buy them when they had water. Never had she tasted anything quite like this drink.

She wrinkled her nose and didn't touch it for the rest of the night.

0-0-0

"You two have been behaving," Ms. Byers said off-handedly, glancing over the top of a dessert menu. "If Karen says it's okay, you all can go over to the arcade—" she paused for a second, smiling over Mike's cheers that went noticed in the otherwise quiet restaurant, "—given that you two promise to behave. I heard there's a new game they have there that cost quite the pretty penny, so I figured Mike would

like to see it."

"Are you talking about—" Mike paused, gaping.

His mom nodded. "Here's your allowance. I'm not kidding, Michael. Don't spend this all at that one damned machine."

Mike had grabbed El's hand and dragged her from the restaurant before his mom could add in more about behaving.

"So you can't tell my friends we did this. I promised them I would never do something like this. But I think this is a special occasion," he prattled as she continued tugging her along.

"I promise," she said, hustling to catch up with him. "But aren't we breaking a promise?"

Mike paused. "Technically," he thought things over in his head. The last thing he wanted to do was corrupt El by teaching her breaking promises was okay. "No, we aren't. Because I told them that I wouldn't do something like this without friends. And we're friends. Actually, this is more special, because..."

He stopped talking at that and just kept walking, hoping El would catch on.

She didn't ask any further questions and he sighed in relief.

The two stopped in front of the arcade, Mike observing the windows with the new announcements posted. *Coming Soon*, one said, showing two men with mustaches being attacked by crabs. He waved off the notion of familiarity of the one in red, the one in green being completely forgettable. He spotted what he was searching for inside the store, feeling even luckier that there was no one around it.

"Come on, this is so much fun." He said, taking El's hand and continuing to pull her. Mike thought he was acting a lot like a sled dog today, pulling El around and what not. He tried to calm himself as he entered the noisy room.

El looked around.

Mike froze, knowing things had a high chance of not ending well. El was occasionally overwhelmed by loud noises, and the arcade was filled with title songs and sound effects. He relaxed upon seeing that she seemed more curious than anything.

She looked around again, almost like a dog trying to earn its bearings to a new, strange location. "Which game are you looking for?" she asked.

Mike smiled and pointed straight for the back, and sitting in the dead center, was the best game to ever exist.

"The man," he said, building up suspense. "The legend... The guy who's not really a man because he's a man ape!"

"*Donkey Kong*?" El asked.

"Yes!" Mike paced around the machine, observing its form. "This arcade is great about getting everything the minute it comes out. This game has been out for a while, but a mishap with soda and an overweight kid put the old one out of service, so this one is new, and in mint condition and everything!"

He observed the control panel, pushing the joystick around. It was so pleasant to feel what unhinged movement was like, to not have Jumpman's performance slowed by stray crumbs. The ordinance that enforced no food except in the food court was a godsend.

El sat back and watched. "What does it do?"

Mike smirked. "Arcade games are like Dungeons and Dragons, except they move. On their own. Well, not on their own, but you get to control them!"

There was no response from the fawnish girl. She blinked and Mike knew that she would have no understanding of this unless she saw them in action.

He felt a little sad, knowing that El had never experienced the joy of an arcade. School had kept his friends and himself far too busy to ever take her, and it wasn't like any of his friends were wealthy enough to afford an actual game of their own. He pulled out the

change that his mother had given him and pushed the first of his coins into the slot and waited for the magic.

The starting sound effects booted up once more and cycled through before the giant ape climbed into the screen, holding Paulina hostage. "I'll show you how it's done first, then you can play."

El nodded as Donkey Kong continued to ascend the ladders.

"So the object of this game," he said, making room for El as she curiously approached. "Is to rescue your girlfriend, Paulina. You've gotta jump over the barrels," he said, demonstrating, "and climb the ladders."

Mike jammed away at the buttons, jerkily moving the joystick around with the calculation of a professional or the randomness of an amateur. Within a matter of moments, he had retrieved the hammer to show El how Jumpman could defend himself against the ape's arsenal.

"Some people are calling this guy Mario now. I don't know why," he said off-handedly. "I think a new game will come out soon."

A barrel came whirling down the slanted beams just as Jumpman's power-up faded, leaving Mike to die. "Damn. And every time you're hit, you lose a life. If you run out of lives, it's a game over."

Mike recovered from his blunder gracefully, beating the round within his second attempt. A cartoon heart appeared over the couple's heads, yet the ape stole Paulina away again. "And games consist of rounds. You know, like how there's more than one adventure in a Dungeons and Dragons campaign. You pretty much just keep playing until you have a game over."

He kept at the game until his fingers started to cramp. It took him a little while to realize that El was actually still there with him. "Oh! El! I'm so sorry, do you want me to talk? Or get off the game?"

El shook her head, keeping her eyes on the screen. "It's really cool." She pointed at the screen. The pixelated flames took advantage of Mike's distracted state and burned Jumpman, claiming his final life.

The game played a deathful tune and a screen flashed over. "I've got a high score!" Mike exclaimed. "Holy shit, I'm number one!"

"That's a big number," El stated. "It's... it's fifty-thousand..."

Mike nodded, encouraging her.

"Fifty-seven thousand and nine-hundred."

Mike nodded again. "Good job. It's not even close to my best score, or the normal best scores for this machine, but still. This machine must be really new."

Mike pressed at the buttons again, typing *M-I-K* into the name register.

El bumped into Mike with her hip, hovering into him. "Can I try?"

She popped a quarter into the machine, trying the controls out for herself. Within a matter of moments, she had died. She frowned slightly.

After her first defeat, El tried again. She hopped over barrels and scurried for the hammer again. She had almost reached it before a barrel clotheslined Jumpman and killed her again. "I think I prefer to watch."

Mike nodded. "Of course, of course." He was quiet until genius struck him. "Do you think you could use your powers?"

El shot a glance at him that had a hint of attitude behind it. Nancy was probably ruining El by teaching her how to be a jackass teenager. "I don't like using them in public. And electricity is mean. I don't like it. Especially now."

Mike raised his eyebrows, a little lost. "I'm sorry, I'm being a geek. But what's wrong you're your powers? You've messed with the T.V. stations before. What's wrong now?"

She looked around, surveying how more and more kids were starting to spill in. She shrugged. "I get headaches now. Not normally, but with electricity."

Mike looked around, worried. "We need to talk." He sucked in his breath in bravery and took El by the hand, focusing on the mission. He moved to the photo booth and checked to see if it was occupied, blowing out in frustration to see that it was.

"What's that?" El asked.

"Photo booth. They have cameras built in that take pictures of people. But, as you can see, it's also a private place that too many people like to take advantage of."

Much to Mike's horror, whoever had been inside and had clearly not been utilizing the photo service threw the curtain aside.

Inside, a disgruntled blonde girl huffed out and crossed her arms, her hair affray. Mike was afraid to make eye contact with her boyfriend, but steeled his nerves and looked up.

In all of his height and pissed-off-edness, Troy stood before Mike. He made an indiscernible face which probably meant his rusty, rusty cogs were at work in his head. "Why do you think you can come here and tell everyone else what to do, Squealer?"

"Because I have a right to be here," Mike responded, sizing up to his opponent. It had taken a few weeks before Troy and his cronies would ever approach Mike and his friends again, especially El. Eventually, their small minds rejected that things can exist beyond what is seen, like invisible powers or atoms. They stopped believing in El's extreme power and started believing that some sort of science had duped them.

And they were very angry about it.

Without hesitation, Troy unleashed a right hook that collided firmly against something resistant. A meaty, squelching sound ensued, making Mike nauseous. He flinched, squeezing his eyes shut, waiting for the pain to strike him. When it didn't, Mike glanced over at El, who had a telltale hold on something.

She blinked and eased back, blood beginning to dribble from her nose. Before Mike could stop her, El resumed a hurt look and feigned

a whimper.

Everything had happened in a fraction of a second. When distracted employees and customers looked up, they saw a coward who had unleashed his anger on a tiny girl.

Someone approached as Tony made a noise of pain, clutching at his throbbing fist. His bimbo stared dumbly from her seat in the booth, her hand shaking as it held open the curtain.

"Did you just hit her?" a voice of unknown origin asked.

Tony shook his hand, looking around for the accuser. "No! I was trying to hit this little queer! She must've jumped in because she's more man than him! Fucking dyke, with her short-ass hair and bad attitude," he spat.

El smiled in the slightest, seeming very proud of herself. She was confused, however, having learned a new word that she was never to use. "It hurts."

An employee dressed in a pin-striped jersey moved around to hand her a paper towel he had wadded up and ran beneath cold water. El pressed it to her cheek, continuing to play her role excellently. She dabbed at her bloody nose as if it was an afterthought and moved closer to Mike, taking his hand.

Mike looked over at the awkward teenage boy, thanking him.

"Should I call the police?" he asked.

Mike glanced over at El, who had gone rigid. He shuddered at the thought they were sharing, that of an angry Hopper beating the ever-living shit out of Troy. However, he kept the worry to himself that Hopper would also likely pound his ass for letting his little girl get hurt. "No, thank you. But, if you could get him out of here, that would be great."

The boy nodded, looking from Mike, to El, to Troy, and cycling again. "Well, you heard him. Get out of here." His voice shook, as Troy had put on more muscle and the employee was rail-thin.

Troy grimaced and ran out, embarrassed once again.

The girl, nameless throughout the ordeal, looked around in shame. She let out a tortured huff, as if she had been the most inconvenienced of the four, and left.

0-0-0

"Mike, what is a dyke?" El asked as she stepped into the booth. "It's a mean word, but what does it really mean?"

Mike sighed. "It is very mean. I'm going to explain it later though, because we have more private business to go over now. What do you mean, you get headaches?"

"Most, when I use my powers, I just feel a hot flash. But then it's gone. But now, it stays. And it's called a headache. But it's only when I play with electricity. Or radios. And it didn't happen before," El explained.

Her Mike nodded, understanding. "Is that it?"

She nodded, feeling embarrassed that her English was unable to properly explain the intricacies of pain. "Yes."

"Good," Mike responded, smiling. He leaned forward and activated the camera, directing her attention at it. "Look at the camera and smile. Nothing else can ruin this date."

Mike was very right. The manager had been waiting outside the booth when they exited, seeming concerned. He offered them free food, courtesy for being so quick to handle with the situation. He also complimented El on her outstanding strength, as he had never seen someone be hit like that, only to come away with only a bloody nose.

El and Mike enjoyed an unhealthy serving of salty fries and another soft drink, El feeling like she had been permitted to break the 'one soda a day' rule.

"Can we play more?" El asked.

Mike nodded, hopping down from the seat he had taken. He

discarded his and El's trash before moving towards the bathroom. "You might want to wash your hands, it's common courtesy."

El smiled, moving into the bathroom to clean herself.

It was a single-stalled room with a harsh overhead light. El observed her reflection in the dusty mirror, wiping at her nose to make sure the dried blood had disappeared.

When she turned on the tap, the pipes complained noisily and the light overhead flickered. El froze up, hot water scalding her palms. She remained tense until the bulbs quit fussing, terrified that something would happen in the milliseconds of darkness.

Nothing happened.

She drew her hands away from the hot water, staring down at the reddened centers of her palms. She frowned lightly before cleaning them and leaving the bathroom as quickly as possible.

Mike had been waiting for her. It appeared as if he had mussed his hair into a tamer form while he was in the restroom. He had a silly smile on his face, which persisted as he took El around to see the rest of the games.

There was a total of fourteen machines in the entire arcade, most of which were older.

"What's that one? *Gal-aga*?" El asked, pointing at the decorated metallic insectoid on the side of the game.

"It's about aliens. And you have to shoot and kill them."

El placed herself in front of it, turning to Mike and asking for a coin.

He was visibly buzzing with excitement as he handed her one, giving her a rundown of the controls as the game started up.

"You'll probably be good at this one. Really, you just have to keep shooting and not get shot or abducted."

El nodded as she began to blast at enemy spaceships. The galaxy's

tiny, winking stars in the background reminded her of nights spent far away from civilization. Before she comprehended what was happening, she had progressed through the first round of enemies without taking a scratch. "Fun. But it's still more fun to watch."

"You're a natural," Mike stated.

Her game lasted upwards of five minutes before she met her fate at the hands of her own fighter she had lost. She beamed upon realizing she had scored fourth-highest, manipulating the joystick so that her name in the system read *E-L*.

"That's weird," Mike's voice wavered and cracked lightly, as was expected of a pubescent boy.

El frowned. "But it was easy."

"Not that," Mike said, directing her attention to the people who had beat her out.

Descending from first to third place were the titles, *M-I-C*, *H-A-E*, and *L*.

The cursor continued to blink, waiting for El's confirmation of her name. When she let the game sit idle for too long, the game blipped and had started over at the title screen once again. For some reason, as the theme song played once again, it had taken up a faint echo.

"Something new?" she asked.

Mike agreed instantly.

As the two walked away to continue the tour, El decided that she didn't like *Galaga* anymore.

0-0-0

A/N: For those who haven't noticed, I'm trying to keep El in character by having her continue to speak somewhat-broken English. Her sentences would reasonably be getting more complex at this point, yet she's still a quiet character and is expected to make mistakes as she tries to speak harder

sentences, or gets scared.

I'm a nineties child, I have no clue how accurate my description of an 80's arcade is. However, I do know that, while *Donkey Kong* was the latest game to feature Mario, he was known as Jumpman, and Peach was known as Paulina. Or, I guess Daisy was Paulina, they're both brunette.

Poll: Would anyone be willing to read fluff trash that features literally nothing but El not understanding some words and having Mike explain them to her?

6. Compass

A/N: If you've missed me, please favorite and leave a review to show your gratitude. I swear, if this story picks up more in popularity, I'll write for it more often.

0-0-0

Mike sat in his room, staring at the ceiling. He was idly picking at the skin of his shocked hand, failing at ignoring the itchy sensation that constantly plagued it. He had thoughts that El wasn't meant to heal like a mage, so she had somehow messed it up. However, those thoughts were toxic, and suppressed.

His date earlier had been everything he had hoped for, and more. Before he had met El, Mike was still at the age where it was acceptable to be repulsed by females. Yet in meeting her, he had found a girl who liked video games, Dungeons and Dragons, and any other nerdy thing that he could think of. For what she was, El was great.

Yet he was met with inevitable resistance from each one of his friends at some point.

Lucas was the most verbal about it, insisting that girls would be the downfall to their group. Mike knew he didn't really think this and he was still wary about getting his ass kicked, even if he denied it. Dustin, covered his emotions up with immature jokes, so whatever problem he had with the two was hidden under the unintelligent guise of laughing. Will was the worst of them all. He never talked about it.

Ever.

Will just sat in sullen silence and glared.

Mike lulled his head over and stared out the window. The melted remnants of his radio sat by the window pane, sulking. He found himself wondering why it wasn't in the trash. It served no purpose, other than reminding him that there was no such thing as normal

anymore.

Downstairs, the hanging grandfather clock chimed as eleven fifteen hit. By now, his family members had to be sound asleep.

Mike rose and adjusted his mussed clothing, searching for his protection.

Since the Demogorgon appeared, Mike always carried precautions when he left the house alone. There was little that he could fit into his pockets that could do any damage against an otherworldly beast, so he resolved in carrying a compass around. As he walked throughout Hawkins, he would occasionally check the needle to ensure that he wasn't walking through a magnetic field that signified a portal.

He found the small compass sitting by his alarm clock. Mike picked it up, observing it. The needle pointed to true north. There was no portal around, and there hadn't been one since El reappeared.

The compass comforted him by letting him partially believe in the illusion of safety. The only time he found himself worrying was when he wondered about what else could be lurking about. What if there was a creature who traveled around without the need of a magnetically-charged portal?

Or even worse, what if there was a creature who resided on Earth, entirely without a home world?

Mike ignored his common sense. There was no need in worrying when he was about to leave, as he would only make himself paranoid.

As silently as he could, he worked his way downstairs. The seventh stair always creaked, so he cautiously skipped it and continued towards the garage.

Tonight, there was a midnight meeting at Dustin's. Meetings were regularly conducted to strategize about future battles, the stations alternating between the houses belonging to Dustin, Lucas and Mike. Will's dog was prone to barking, so his house was avoided.

Mike felt a deep sense of dread settle in his stomach when he opened the door to the garage. A swelling in his throat pressed against his airway, making him dizzy with fear. He fumbled backwards, falling flat on his ass.

The shadow advanced and stepped into the light.

"Christ, Mike! What are you doing?" Nancy hissed, stowing something bulky into her purse.

"I don't know, Nancy!" he whispered back. "What are *you* doing?"

There was an awkward silence between the two.

"Truce?" Mike asked, anxious to leave.

Nancy nodded, advancing to the doorway. "I was seeing Steve."

"I'm going to meet the guys."

"You're leaving alone?" she asked, seeming concerned. At least, as much as an older sister could be concerned.

"I know what I'm doing," Mike defended himself. "I have a compass." He shuddered at the weakness of his reply. "So I can track any portals that open up. And there's been nothing around recently. So I'll be fine."

Nancy nodded. "So you're only in trouble if you run into Troy. Or a pedophile."

"Exactly."

Mike squirmed around her, searching for his bike. "How did you get in so quietly? This door is old as hell."

Nancy paused. The two were clearly both uncomfortable with the awkward conversation. She shrugged. "I had it oiled so it didn't make as much noise." She casually adjusted her shirt, searching through her purse for something.

Mike quietly looked for the bike, ignoring the fact that his sister was

a veritable badass.

Without a sound, Nancy had left and presumably went upstairs. Mike found his bike and picked it up, wheeling it to the front door. However good a job that Nancy had done at silencing the door, he wanted to take no chances of her lying or him having bad luck.

Before opening the door, Mike, still trembling from the surprise, took the compass from his sealed pocket. It was pointing north, and he decided he was safe.

He opened the door and wheeled the bike outside, shutting and locking the door behind him with a spare key that was hidden in the garden.

The night was heavy and sticky as most Indiana nights were. Clouds blocked patchworks of stars and gave the impression that the sky was a cloth missing chunks of design, giving way to pure black behind it. The moon was high and provided little light. Mike was only able to see where he was going from the streetlights that hung in the cul-de-sac.

Often, way before the Demogorgon stole Will, he would take short cuts through the woods. Yet since then, he relied on taking streets to travel to Dustin's.

His journey would take an extra ten minutes because of the nightmare that occurred.

Mike was quiet during the trip throughout the Hawkins suburbs. As he traveled from his mother's house to Dustin's, there was a shift in the atmosphere. Houses went from two-storied two one-storied, lawns growing increasingly smaller. Eventually, houses turned into trailers.

Eventually, Mike pulled up to Dustin's trailer. It was much happier than his own, the love radiating from the walls. The Wheeler house was a blanket more than anything, covering the tension instead of resolving it. His parents were the traditional suburban family, yet Dustin's family truly cared for him, and it was tangible.

Mike found himself smiling as he added his bike to the pile by the paved road. Lucas was the only other visitor, as was traditional. No one blamed Will for staying inside, and the others were often somewhat relieved. He carried a cloud more obvious than those over cartoon characters.

Mike kept his walking silent as he walked through the gravel driveway, opening the front door silently. He locked it behind him, glancing out onto the street.

There was nothing, and no one, around, other than flickering street lights and lightning bugs.

Dustin's laugh resonated throughout the empty house. His voice seemed to notice he was supposed to be quiet and shrank by decibels.

Mike went to Dustin's door and slowly opened it, shutting it behind him. He awkwardly navigated around the clutter of the tiny room to the others.

Lucas and Dustin were sitting at the base of Dustin's mattress, looking over a dungeon map that had been modified topographically to represent Hawkins. The town square was the size of a dime and countless plastic trees surrounded the board, the scale trying to account for as much space as possible.

"Oh, hey Mike." Dustin had a tint to his voice, a humorous tint it was rarely missing. His hair was as messy as usual, and he was wearing a well-loved *Star Wars* shirt. "We were wondering what was keeping you so long."

Lucas smiled. Even in the dead of night, he was wearing his bandana. "Yeah, was it the wife?"

Mike elected to ignore the two. He had no idea if they had already heard about the date, but he was almost sure that if they knew, Will was the culprit.

Mike sat himself beside the two, pulling out his compass again. "So. We haven't officially met since I charred my hand."

Lucas put on his serious face and withdrew his compass. The two

compared the needles to ensure both were functioning properly. "Do you think you should sit out this next expedition?"

Mike shook his head. "I feel fine. Plus, the more people we have out this time, the likelier we are to find something. If there is anything to be found."

Dustin pointed at one area of the map with excitement. "I was thinking we should head out this way." It was an area northwest of the quarry. "I was out biking a few days ago, and I was getting a few spikes, and the needle was pointing a bit to the side."

"Alright," Lucas conceded, "If we go, what should we bring? We haven't seen anything real for quite a while."

Dustin scratched his head, the angry creature on his head messing its fur up more. "Well, out that way, there are some electricity towers. Maybe some wire cutters so we can get through the fences?"

Mike nodded. "And El."

Lucas slammed his hands down on the board. "I knew it! Dustin, give me my money!"

Mike, confused, looked between the two.

"Every other dumbass sentence out of your mouth has to be about her!" Lucas, despite his voice being lowered, sounded even more annoyed. He took a ten from Dustin, placing it into his pocket.

"Did you bet on that?" Mike asked after a short pause.

"It's technically not a bet if it's guaranteed to happen," Lucas mumbled.

Mike looked at the beige carpet, somewhat embarrassed. He would never admit it, but he knew Lucas was right.

There was silence until the lights overhead flickered. "See! They did it again!" Dustin hissed, recoiling onto the mattress.

"Maybe it's because your electricity out here is shit."

"I'm telling you, the electricity has been being a bitch recently. First Mike had his hand burned to shit, and then the lights flicker constantly."

"Well, Mike has recently had the common sense of a bag of rocks, and the lights always flicker."

"I resent that," Mike stated. "And I think Dustin has a point."

Lucas looked around, then at the bare lightbulb. "What could be wrong with electricity?"

"There could be something messing with the power plant," Dustin offered. "It's a ways out, but it would take two hours to get there, max."

Mike looked at the Hawkins map, thinking for a moment. "How far is it from the quarry?"

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Forty minutes after arriving, Mike was preparing for his voyage back to his house. The trio had made a list of the essentials they would need for their trek. They would borrow some rubber house-cleaning gloves from Mike's mom, wire cutters, and thick goggles meant for chemistry class.

They had the exploration date set to Sunday, when any potential workers would be most likely to be off. Each one of them were responsible for checking the weather and preparing for it.

Before stepping out into the night, Mike checked his compass for abnormalities. There was no threat that the magnetic fields could detect, so he sucked in a breath and left Dustin's trailer.

He crunched gravel beneath his feet as he approached his bike. He glanced over it for signs of vandalization, and checked Lucas's as well. When he found nothing of concern, he hopped on it and began to bike back to his house.

Mike was thankful that summer nights were cooler than the days, yet he still cursed Indiana weather. It was at least eighty degrees out, and

in combination with the sticky residue that eternally hung in the air, he found it hard to breathe as he wove through the curving streets of Hawkins.

He arrived home a few minutes until one. He snuck inside and replaced his bike where it belonged. He crawled into his bed, shut his eyes, and was gone.

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A/N: Done.

Please for the love of god review and favorite if you enjoyed this. I have a lot of followers and not as many favorites, and IF I can get at least 30 total favorites by Sunday night, I will have a new chapter out before April 20th!

7. Preparations

A/N: Yea I've been busy as hell, please don't give me shit for it.

As promised, this was *technically* posted before the new season came out.

Also, for those who watch BoJack, what was your opinion on the new season? It is now officially my favorite show, please give it a shot.

Sunday morning was as empty of a morning as one could get in Indiana. There was no humidity in the early morning air. No birds sang off in the distance. No cars drove down the street, no children played in front of them, and nothing seemed real.

Despite the fact that it was twenty minutes before sunrise, and most people would be asleep, it still felt surreal to Will as he prepared himself for the day's journey. He heard it through the grapevine that an expedition was being made out to the power plant, and while he felt he would remain useless throughout the endeavor, he wanted to go with his good friends to protect them in any way he could.

More importantly, he wanted to ensure that El wouldn't get hurt in any way possible.

A day prior, Dustin had come to his house and banged on the front door like his life depended on it. He barreled into the house and almost tripped over himself. El, who had answered the door (because she had learned it was polite to answer the door), watched the chaotic hurricane tear his way through the house. Dustin had plopped himself onto the couch before loudly asking El if her parents were home.

"No," she responded.

As soon as Will had heard this, he went from walking to sprinting towards the living room. The last thing he wanted was for top-secret information to be disclosed to El.

Alas, it was too late.

"We're going out tomorrow. To the power plant. You and Will are coming, right?"

Will moved into the living room just in time to see El emphatically nod her head.

"Oh, hey Will! We're going to the power plant tomorrow for some inspection, are you coming?" Dustin asked, as if he hadn't already shouted the question to the entirety of Indiana.

Will blinked. "Yes. Of course I am."

Dustin smiled, looking incredibly proud of himself. Dustin's train of thought was so loud that Will heard him saying *good job* to himself. "Mike said I should help you all pack too!"

El wrinkled her eyebrows together. "Are we taking suit-cases?" she asked, mouthing her way around the new word.

"Well no. We're packing backpacks."

"And why do we need help?" Will asked, stuffing his hands into his sweatpants.

"Because Mike said to help pack because if you didn't help pack – er, if I didn't help pack you – I wouldn't – no, you wouldn't pack."

El had a look of utter confusion on her face. Will had a similar one.

"If I didn't help you pack you wouldn't come," Dustin clarified, almost tripping over his words again in excitement.

Will nodded, pretending to understand the tornado that spilled out of Mike's mouth. "Got it. So, just to clarify, we're both going."

Dustin nodded. "Yep!"

Will rolled his eyes and started down his hallway. "I'm grabbing my backpack."

In the peripherals of his vision, he saw El sink into the couch as Dustin moved busily around the living room. Will shifted through the shambled mess of his closet, trying to find the backpack that was meant to stay buried until school started again. "Will!"

Dustin's voice was shrill and loud and gave Will a start. "Does Hopper have any wire cutters?"

Will sighed, closing his eyes. "In the shed!"

The shed where everything started. He shuddered. There was no way he wanted Dustin to go in there, but like hell he would ever go in there again. There was an array of flashlights, tools, weaponry and other necessities lying in the cluttered mass of wood, and he could find everything within a second, but he figured little damage would be done if he let Dustin rustle around in there. The worst that could happen would be Dustin destroying an ancient contraption rusted with age, but Hopper wouldn't care.

Finally, Will found his canvas backpack and pulled it out from beneath clothing and Dungeons and Dragons-related material. He turned around to toss it on his bed and had a heart attack when he saw a dark figure stooping before him.

He tripped over himself and fell backwards into his closet onto the masses of cushioning clothing. Trapped, he struggled to gain some sturdiness beneath him as he tried to face his opponent.

There was nothing he could use to defend himself with the soft masses of clothing encircling him, spare a pencil. He grabbed for it and firmly grasped it.

Everything happened in a fraction of a second and it felt like an eternity.

El stood before him, sitting in a baggy, dark t-shirt, looking very confused. "Did I scare you?"

Will blinked. The air rushing into his lungs slammed him like a concrete wall. "Kind of."

There was an awkward silence as Will tried to stand up. He felt like

he had sat in a giant bean bag and couldn't get up. "You're just so quiet."

El nodded. "Dustin went out to the shed."

Will adjusted himself and grabbed for his backpack. "I told him to."

"I don't like the shed."

There was a moment of silence as Will tried to comprehend what she had just said. Will couldn't decide why El decided she didn't like it. Will had never mentioned that when he was stolen away, he had been cornered in the shed. He had crossed over into a different universe at some point after being attacked in it. There was some degree of paranormal activity that occurred there.

"It's a bad place."

Dustin started banging at the door and yelling. "Will, I can't find them!"

"Then look for them!" Will yelled back. "They're beneath the window!"

El picked up the backpack from the bed and opened it, emptying the remaining contents. "He didn't look for long."

Will shook his head. "I think he got distracted."

Two pencils and a colored pencil fell out of the bottom of the backpack. Will picked the utensils up and shelved them into his drawer, restoring his room to its order. The only portion of his room that ever fell into disorder was his closet, and he liked keeping it that way.

A terrible feeling settled in Will's stomach.

He didn't know why, and he didn't want to.

A/N: Okay this is like a microchapter but still.

8. Knight Campaign

A/N: I'm on a roll. And I'm in college now, so I'm not swamped with work from my hard-ass high school anymore.

My story is now hella AU. The plot of this story will remain the same, but I'll slowly be fixing irregularities between this and season 2.

This story is now set over the summer between eighth and ninth grade for the kids. From now on, I'll be writing canon to season 2, but I don't have any idea when I'll be fixing the first seven chapters of this. **SO SPOILERS AHEAD.** The major changes I have made are that El now lives with Hopper and lives under his strict rules, rather than living between Joyce and Hopper with laxer rules. El is more articulate, but she still struggles a bit. Max will start appearing. Billy will play a role in this (maybe?). And most importantly, new arcade games will appear, since it's '85!

I don't own Stranger Things, all I own are my ideas and a lot of student loans.

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Anxiety sat like a rock in El's stomach. She was waiting, ears pricked, for her signal to get going. Today was the day that they ventured out to the radio tower, taking upwards of two hours to walk there. Due to the hilly nature of the forest surrounding the area, there was no way they could possibly take their bikes out, so leaving early in the day to walk was the only option the group had.

El heard static from Hopper's wind-up radio crackle. "El," whispered a voice. It echoed faintly in the poor reception. "El, come in. This is Lucas. Do you copy?"

Despite the fact that El had been staring at the ceiling, unable to fall asleep, El found herself too tired to lunge for the radio like she had been expecting herself to do for the past several hours.

Lucas signaled her again. "El. It is currently four-hundred and thirty hours. Do you copy? Over."

El took in a deep breath and moved her weak hands toward the radio. She held it in one hand before responding. "I copy, Lucas. Over and out."

El rose quietly from her position on the bed. She flicked on a flashlight running low on batteries and propped it in the furthest corner from her door. The light was so faint there was no chance of it waking Hopper. However, it significantly reduced her chances of finding what she needed without waking him.

She removed the baggy t-shirt and sweatpants she slept in and placed several layers of new clothing she would molt as the day grew hotter onto the bed. She begrudgingly picked up a bra by its straps and stared at it with a grimace before placing it onto her sore chest. The daily medications she had been taking while imprisoned at the lab significantly slowed her hormone production, but two years of freedom was starting to take its toll and transform her body. El shimmied her way into a pair of leggings and then jeans. She placed on a t-shirt and a sweater, then finally, a light rain jacket.

A backpack brimming with the day's necessities sat behind the tail of the quilt that dangled off of her bed. She pulled it out without letting it drag noisily against the wooden planks of the floor. The backpack was heavier than she was, so maneuvering it was no easy task. She sucked in a breath and hauled it off the floor and onto her bed.

She checked every compartment for its needed packaging. A heavy-duty flashlight with fresh batteries sat wrapped in a flannel she would wear in case the early morning was too cold. An army knife, two boxes of Band-Aids, a rag, and a crowbar rested in the main compartment. El moved deftly to her drawers and put on her thickest pair of socks, throwing another wool pair into the backpack. The bandana Kali had gifted her was stuffed into a zippered pouch. Emergency rations of nutrient-dense food, ranging from Eggos to candy, was spaced intermittently throughout the canvas satchel.

Everything she could possibly need was in that backpack. She tossed it over her shoulder and slipped her arm through it. She grabbed the

wind-up radio and crackled the button several times to signal to Lucas she was preparing to leave.

Without making a sound, she turned off the flashlight sitting in the corner, moved into the living room, and prepared to open the front door.

"Where do you think you're going?"

El froze, her hand on the doorknob. She couldn't see anything in the pitch black of the dawn in the Hawkins woods, but she could feel Hopper's glare on her. And she could feel how much trouble she was in.

She removed her hand from the metal on the ancient cabin door and tucked it into the pocket of her overalls.

Wood creaked as Hopper moved from his position in the dark. He flipped on the light, looking very upset.

El had taken caution to wake herself up at 4:30, long before Hopper would wake up to get ready for work. Apparently, waking up earlier than him had been a bad mistake. She should have waited until he departed for work. Instead of arriving late to the party, she now wouldn't arrive at all.

Hopper moved over to her frozen form. His arms were crossed over his bare chest. He had just woken up, wearing his flannel pajama bottoms. "Where do you think you're going?"

The tone of voice in his repeating sentence grew more threatening.

El looked down to her feet and tried her best to formulate a lie that would put her in less trouble than the truth.

Any plausible lie would work, really. Anything would be safer than venturing down to the power plant to check out some evil that had survived the portal shutting. Or some evil that was from a dimensional plane entirely different than the Upside Down.

"Lucas has an emergency." Lucas was doubtlessly the person in her friend group that Hopper hated the least. He wasn't as reckless as

Dustin or as danger-bound as Will. And he certainly wasn't romantically involved with her like Mike.

"The police can take care of emergencies. And last time I checked, I was head of the police here. Should I come with you?"

El couldn't think of a response.

"I've been lenient, letting you go on dates and whatnot. But the doc said you should wait at least a year before going out in broad daylight."

"It's still dark out," she retorted before she could stop herself. She knew the sarcasm infringing into her voice would get her in some serious shit one day, but she could never control her tongue.

Hopper looked outside, registering that she had woken up before the sun, and was planning to leave before it rose. "So it is."

A silence filled the room. El looked back down at her feet, staring at her beat-up sneakers that had carried her to Chicago and back.

"Something is wrong." El attempted to be as vague as possible without explicitly lying or telling the truth.

Hopper nodded. "Yes, that's right."

"I need to fix it." El remained still, but frustration began to bubble in her chest. "And you can't help like you did with the gate. This is different."

"And how is it different?" Hopper asked, having moved from his position right in front of his door to by the fridge. He pulled out a gallon jug of orange juice and began to drink it straight from the bottle.

"I want to know how it's different, too. Because I don't know why. I just know it is."

El watched as Hopper took another drink from the carton. "If you open that door you're as good as grounded until school starts."

By the time Hopper finished his sentence, El had picked up the carton from afar and was dangling it above his head. Hopper, obviously still fatigued, blinked stupidly. She felt terrible, taking advantage of Hopper in his pre-morning coffee state. "Put that down."

El floated the carton back into the fridge and shut it with her mind. "Look at me."

Hopper turned to face her, his face stern. He blinked again, scratching his fingers through his beard.

"I need to go. I need to."

Hopper nodded, shooing her out the door with his hand. "If you're in real trouble, just go. But don't expect there won't be consequences for not telling me."

El had shut the door before he finished his last sentence. She had grown from frustrated to furious in the midst of the conversation. However, as soon as the cold morning hit her face she sobered up.

She shivered, feeling pathetic, empty and embarrassed for being caught. She zipped up her jacket, not ready to journey to the day's meeting point, the quarry.

Fortunately, Will, who lived closest to the quarry, had loaned El his bike and had Jonathan drop it off. She would still have a twenty minute ride in the pitch dark to get even remotely close to central Hawkins, and another twenty minutes of travel on top of that to reach the quarry itself.

El positioned herself on the bike, tediously adjusting herself and her heavy backpack so she wouldn't fall off. It had been a few months since she began to learn how to ride a bike, but she was still inexperienced with it, especially since Hopper only let her practice in the solace of the deep woods by his cabin.

Dirt crunched as El rolled the bike away from the lee of the house into the open road beyond the path. The wind grew sharper as El sped up on the bike. She followed the path in the darkness, knowing the paths as well as she knew herself.

The paths were her only connection to the outside world on most days. Hopper had sworn by Dr. Owens that El would not be around in the public for a year, but as time progressed he had loosened these restrictions. El was allowed in the property surrounding Hopper's house for a diameter of fifty yards. She could, on very rare occasions, hang out with the others if they were in the arcade or join them in restaurants. She could go to houses, as long as Mike wasn't the only one home, and as long as she had a ride to and from.

Most days, however, El was only allowed within her thin diameter of freedom, so following her dirt paths was a lifeline she often indulged herself in.

By the time El had reached Hawkins, the sun was already beginning to illuminate the sky. Her argument with Hopper had set her very far back in her schedule, so her lungs burned as she attempted to speed up to account for lost time.

She passed the grocery store she had robbed and shattered the doors of. She passed the arcade that held so many of her fond memories. Within the time it took for the sun to provide light to the sun emerging over the line of trees in the distance, El had reached the quarry.

No one had arrived yet, much to her surprise. Dustin was constantly distracted, Max had to skateboard everywhere, Lucas enjoyed his sleep, and Will was without a bike. The only surprising absence was from Mike.

Mike was typically punctual, even more so than El. Ever since she had been taught to read the clocks Hopper had in the house, she had been fascinated by the concept of time. Mike was as good with time as she was, so it was unusual to see him unable to manage it.

He doesn't have his radio, El remembered.

Maybe he had missed his wake-up call.

El had been sitting on her bike as she processed his absence. She awkwardly removed herself from the rubber seat and walked the bike to a patch of foliage that would hide it well. When it was hidden

from the public eye, she moved to the edge of the quarry and peered over it.

She always had a curious fear of fissures. Not heights, not falls, but fissures themselves, fissures that fell deep into the earth. They reminded her of the gate, of the vines that branched off of it, and of the Upside Down. They reminded her of fissures that she had seen in dreams that were so empty they never ended, fissures that poured steam from their gaping mouths in an abandoned, rusted town. The sun faintly cast light over the sections of water closest to her, but the majority of the lake remained shrouded in blackness and fog. In the early morning, the quarry was a terrifyingly empty place –

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– a place so empty that it felt like nothing had weight. It felt like nothing breathed in the world, nothing lived, nothing loved. El looked around, feeling like she didn't exist in this strange world. She felt like nothing existed, but she knew so much better.

The Demogorgon lived here. Other creatures, shadow creatures, that she could never see but she could constantly feel, lived there. It was unnatural how empty the world there felt, and she knew better, and she had to keep that in mind.

She couldn't ever forget she wasn't alone as she wondered the Upside Down Hawkins Middle School, because, if she forgot, if she let her guard down, for just a second, she would die –

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She would die if she fell from this height, she knew, but that didn't stop her from sitting on the edge.

The slightest noise she made echoed throughout the entirety of the valley Hawkins was nestled in. Each time she shuffled on the lip of the quarry fall, echoes poured off of the walls of the quarry and into the distance. Trees that coated the landscape did nothing to absorb the sound. They were just silent observers to the human world, reverberating with every slight shuffle. El became so aware of the noises, of the shifting water, the wind, the falling rocks, and the

complete absence of human or animal noises.

The spell-binding silence was finally broken as the sun peaked over the trees. The noises of a bicycle approached, from the tire hitting the gravel to the spokes groaning in complaint. The unknown biker dismounted and presumably placed his bike next to her own.

He stood behind El before he sat himself beside her.

Mike shrugged off his jacket and placed it over El's shoulders. "Thank you. It's cold."

"I know. Today is going to be long."

A silence shrouded the two. El placed her hands on either side of herself, her elbows weak. She sucked in a breath and held it as long as she could manage before scooting herself closer to him.

Mike picked up his arm and placed it over her shoulders haphazardly. El smiled, feeling incredibly happy.

"Oh!" Mike shouted, instantly removing his arm from her frame. El pouted. "I brought you breakfast."

El smiled and snuggled closer to him, happily taking a plastic bag that he took from his coat pocket. Two Eggos, crinkled and fogging the plastic, waited for her.

She tore into the bag and instantly stuffed one into her mouth, holding it with her teeth as she tore the other out and handed it to Mike.

Mike smiled, taking it and tearing off a small bite.

"Thank you, Mike."

"You're welcome," he responded. He turned around as if he heard a noise, searching for something.

"Did you hear something?" El whispered around a mouthful of carbohydrates. She felt fear settle into her throat. She was totally unaware of what Mike had sensed, and this made her uneasy.

Mike shook his head. "No. I think it was just a car."

They went back to eating their breakfast. El had finished her waffle before Mike could take off another bite. El pouted, upset over her lack of control.

"Can I have some of yours?" she asked.

Mike glanced at her, tearing off another chunk of his. He held it between two fingers and offered it to her. She reached for it, only to have it stolen away.

He smirked at her and moved it back into her reach. "You know, it's rude to refuse food if someone offers it."

"I do know that," she replied sassily, trying to reach for it again.

El frowned as it was taken further from her reach, but quickly lunged forward and took it from his hand with her teeth, nipping him in the process.

"Ouch!" he shouted, jerking his hand away. "You're worse than Holly is!"

El smiled. "It's rude to refuse food."

Mike rolled his eyes and wiped off his fingers. He gave her the rest of his scraps and replaced his arm around her shoulders.

"The guys and Max should be about ten minutes away," he stated offhandedly. "They're never on time for anything."

El wrinkled her nose. Of course Max was coming. Even though she knew Mike was hers, she was still jealous anytime that a female her age came within his proximity.

She glanced over at him, removing a strand of hair from her vision. *Hers*. She moved close to him and kissed him lightly. "You taste like Eggos."

"You must dig that."

She laughed and nodded. She leaned in again, delighted by how warm he was. Even if her feet weren't dangling over the edge of a quarry, she felt like she could fall into eternity with how light her stomach felt.

She jumped out of her skin when she felt something hot and wet touch her bottom lip. She jerked away, wide-eyed. Her mouth dangled open, her face the color of Hopper after he contracted a sunburn.

"Sorry!" Mike shouted, his voice bouncing off of the dome the quarry was sealed inside. "Sorry."

She wiped her mouth and looked down at her hand. "Are you bleeding? It felt like you are."

Mike shook his head and buried it into his hands. "No. T-that's just something I was told that couples do. Dustin mentioned it because Steve mentioned it to him and I thought, that since you know, Steve's older he'd know what to do, even if he did it with Nan--"

He stopped himself before he said something that would scar him, seemingly just as embarrassed as El.

"Well, I liked it. I think," she responded. She adjusted herself and moved back toward Mike, who had picked up his head and sighed.

"Okay," he mumbled.

The two kissed again. El's stomach bunched into a ball of molten lead. Or nickel, so hot it was like the core of the Earth.

From a distance, the sight must have been incredibly awkward, the two trying to figure out a rhythm or how wide their mouths should be open. Yet within their bubble, El felt unreal.

She was shaking, yet she was unsure if it was from the cold or from nerves. No, it had to be from nerves – she felt so hot that she could have banished the mind flayer from Will's body if she moved within a two-foot radius of him.

After a few moments, she pulled away to take in a loud breath,

blushing faintly. "My tummy feels funny." Her stomach contracted sharply with her confession.

"Mine too," Mike responded, shuffling.

"Yeah, so does mine!" a voice in the distance shouted. "Seeing you two suck face makes me sick!"

El squealed, shuffling away from the edge of the fall and tucking her face very far into her knees.

"Dustin, *fuck off!*" Mike shouted, his voice breaking.

Dustin laughed. He had been sitting five feet away, leaning cockily on his bike. It shocked El that he could be so quiet. Or maybe, she had just been distracted. She made angry eye contact with him for a split second before flipping him off and burying her face again.

"Did you teach her that?" Mike asked, feigning shock. "Who taught her that?"

"I dunno. Probably her punk friends that keep showing up." Dustin shrugged.

Dustin screeched as his bike, which supported most of his weight, mysteriously fell to the side and he ended up on the ground with a faceful of gravel.

Mike moved closer to El again. He was trying to hide the smirk on his face, but not doing a good job. El removed the hair falling in front of her face to get a better look at his stupid grin. She placed her chin on her knees and smiled back.

"You guys are assholes," Dustin stated, sitting beside them. "I radioed Will and Lucas before I left. Will never responded, so I assume he's already left. Lucas will be here soon though. So that means Max will be here soon."

Dustin dropped his backpack beside him and began to dump out contents everywhere.

"Y'know, Dustin, the point of packing a bag is so that the shit stays in

the bag to make for easy carrying," Mike stated, annoyed, as he shuffled wads of crumpled paper off of his lap.

"I misplaced something," Dustin responded without interest.

El looked at the assortment of random articles that had spilled out of the bulging bag. Pens, pencils, multiple compasses, a crumpled map, and various other unrecognizable artifacts rested on the ground as Dustin continued to pull more from his bag.

A book with a red binding spilled out. The cover featured a knight wielding a sword against a dragon. El grabbed for the *Dungeons and Dragons* manual, flipping through the worn pages. She remembered seeing the book during the boys' gaming sessions. She remembered it serving as their lifeline when they were caught in peril, guiding them on fighting the Demogorgon and the mind flayer.

Maybe it could help again, somehow.

Dustin took something out of his bag from the very recesses of the cloth. "Found it. No need to worry."

"Still don't know what *it* is."

Dustin plopped a pair of bright yellow gloves onto his lap. "We might need to do some breaking in to places. These and a pair of wire cutters can get us anywhere."

A light breeze came through and picked up a loose piece of paper, banishing it into the quarry below. "I hope that wasn't important," Dustin said to himself.

El flipped leisurely through the pages, admiring the artwork of some of the highlighted creatures. El picked at the sleeves of her jacket as she skimmed the pages, absentmindedly scratching at her tattoo. She wondered what would happen if they were ever to run into a monster that couldn't be encapsulated by the pages of a *Dungeons and Dragons* book, and the thought made her shutter.

The sounds of a car crunching over gravel sounded off in the distance. El craned her neck and looked past thicket and rocks to see Jonathan's old car dropping Will off. He had another bag slung over

his shoulder.

Will turned his back to the group to wave Jonathan off. He shouted something inaudible against the noises of the complaining car, then waddled to the others.

He dropped the bag with such force that the lake below rippled. "This shit is heavy."

"You brought the wire cutters, right?" Dustin asked, glancing up from his pile of rubbish.

Will unzipped his bag and the contents within jumped out. A pair of very large wire cutters poked out the top of the bag. He took them out and handed them to Dustin, who smiled stupidly and poked at the sharp blades. He stuffed the large scissors into his bag first, then packed everything around them.

For a moment, he paused, shuffling through the remaining contents.

He found his binoculars and unrolled the cord wrapped around them. He placed it over his neck and peered through the chunky lenses. "I can see power lines going to the power plant. Just barely, though."

He pulled his face away and pointed in the general direction of the plant. "That way. It's probably about a two hour westward hike to get there. But going through the forest is our safest bet at not getting caught by anything that wants to catch us."

El tried finding the power plant. She squinted and barely made out power lines standing in a clearing, with ominous storm gray clouds hovering above the area. "Is it going to rain?"

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"Are you feeling anything?" Mike asked, Will on one side, El on the other. The three were hanging back from the more enthusiastic half of the group, walking behind them at a slower pace.

Dustin hauled a backpack and constantly readjusted his new hair he had contracted from Steve. Lucas and Max flirted not-so-subtly as they walked, bumping into and pushing each other.

Will shrugged. "I haven't really felt anything since we managed to scare off the mind flayer. I don't think I'm a reliable connection to the Upside Down anymore. Or the place in between."

El looked ahead quietly. "It's quiet."

The walk had been very silent in approach to the station, except for the vocal teenagers. No birds chirped, no squirrels chattered, and even the footfalls of the group seemed to have been sucked to another dimension. The world was quiet.

"I don't know if we have anything to worry about, honestly." Mike adjusted the backpack he was carrying. "I mean, yeah, things have been acting up, but the gate is closed."

"What if it isn't from the gate though, Mike?" Will asked, sounding worried. "What then?"

Mike looked down at the ground. "We'll think about that when we find out, if it happens."

El looked away from her friends. She looked off into the distance, searching for any signs of unusualness. There were no dead plants, no gutted animals, no gaping holes that spewed otherworldly particles into theirs. There was nothing out of the ordinary, so much so, it seemed everything was wrong, because it was so *normal*.

A squirrel hopped out of a bushy entanglement and hopped into the middle of the path. It sat there, flicked its tail in annoyance and chattered angrily.

It was very fat for a squirrel in the summer. Everyone, fascinated by their first encounter with wildlife since the start of the day, stopped and stared at it.

It stood up on its hind legs, holding its front paws against its chest. It chattered again, fluffed its fur, and hopped straight for Lucas.

Lucas swore and backed away, terrified of the angry creature. The squirrel still came for him, so he, panicking, kicked at it.

"Dude, it's just a squirrel," Dustin stated.

"Yeah, but it's rabid!" Lucas exclaimed, finally landing a light kick square in the squirrel's side. It flew for several feet, landed so hard onto the ground it bounced back up, and did not move again.

Max, horrified, clung to Lucas as Dustin went to poke at it. "Jesus, Lucas, you've got the kick of a kangaroo. This thing's got his side torn wide open."

"That wasn't me!" Lucas defended himself. "I just didn't want it killing me!"

"Oh my god, do you guys smell that?" Mike asked, covering his nose with his shirt. "That thing smells rotten."

Dustin froze, backing away. He blinked twice stupidly, retrieved a nearby stick, and approached it again. He distastefully jabbed at the corpse, rolling it so that its stomach was exposed to the sky, dead black eyes rolling into its skull. "It looked like something tore a giant bite out of this thing."

El wrinkled her nose, feeling bad for the poor creature. "Monsters?" she asked.

"Maybe," Dustin replied, crouching next to it. Lucas and Max still hung away, embarrassingly horrified by the rodent, while everyone else neared it.

Will paused and grabbed for Mike's hand.

"Dude, not the time—" Mike started.

Will interrupted him as he yanked Mike's sleeve up, exposing Mike's scarred palm to everyone. "Does that look familiar?"

The squirrel's injury was beyond the ability of anything's bite. It was black, gurgling buckets of green and yellow pus onto the dirt path. There was nothing red in sight – the injury was closed off completely from the body, the black crusting over any organ that could have been visible. The squirrel's leg twitched, and Lucas, who had mustered up some bravery to inspect the corpse, almost fainted.

"Yeah, but how the hell does a squirrel get an electrical burn?" Dustin

asked.

"Power lines?" El asked, pointing off in their general direction.

"Well, I guess that means we're at least going in the right direction." Will took the stick from Dustin, jabbing at the squirrel's face. It didn't respond. "And at least our brave Knight defeated this beast."

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A/N: I did my research and I still understand absolutely nothing about D&D. I need to consult my old roommate, and once I have her advice, I can get more in depth with campaigns.

Story Note: I'm pretty much making it part of my canon that El has seen flashes of the town of Silent Hill. In an older story of mine, she ended up in Silent Hill instead of the Upside Down (and Hopper's house) after she killed the Demogorgon. I really like the idea and I have no real reason to do it, but it's happening. The most I'll do is make vague references to the town and to monsters that inhabit it, just so I can get my nerdy giggles in.